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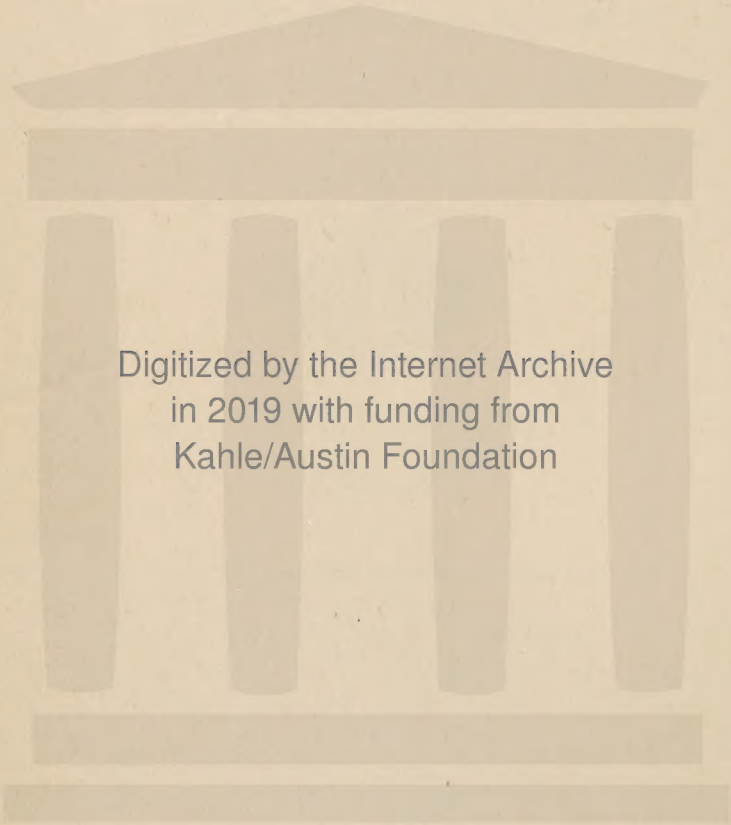

SAINT CHRISTOPHER'S DAY

MR. MARTIN ARMSTRONG

has also written the following books :

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Jeremy Taylor, A Selection from his Works

The Bazaar

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Desert

Sir Pompey and Madame Juno

The Stepson

Saint Hercules

Lady Hester Stanhope

Laughing (*an essay*)

MARTIN ARMSTRONG

SAINT CHRISTOPHER'S DAY

Full soon thy Soul shall have her earthly freight
And custom lie upon thee with a weight
Heavy as frost and deep almost as life.

Wordsworth.

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CHAPTER I

It was very early on the morning of May the 9th, the day on which, according to sacred books of reference, the Eastern Church celebrates the Feast of Saint Christopher. In Trevor Square, one of those little squares pinched in between the converging thoroughfares of Brompton and Kensington Roads, nothing was stirring but the lightly-hung leaves of the rather ungainly poplar-trees which screen one side of the square from the inquisitiveness of the other, and occasionally a lean black shadow which emerged from the basement steps of one or other of the houses, swam across the road, and vanished between the railings of the squalid garden in the middle of the square. Sometimes the silence was broken by the slowly growing and slowly diminishing rumble of a lorry on one of the two thoroughfares, or more rarely by the clop-clop-clop of a horse pulling a van of flowers or vegetables towards Covent Garden. The lamps in the square were beginning to fail in their struggle against the growing twilight : already they had become the most fantastically unreal things in the general unreality of those hours which are neither night nor day.

A house about half-way down the western side of the square was conspicuous even in that faint light for the clean paint of its stucco front, the bright

brass knocker on its door, and the whiteness of its steps and window-curtains.

Here lived the Brades : they had lived there for the last seven years. In the double bedroom on the first floor Christopher Brade turned over from his left side on to his back. His eyes were still closed, but he was no longer asleep. Like a settling sediment his waking consciousness was reassembling itself, drifting downwards through the uncharted waters of his mind, thickening into that solid layer which was all that the world knew of him and almost all that he knew of himself. In a few minutes the process was finished : he was awake. But still he lay with closed eyes. It must be very early : in some instinctive way which he could not have explained, he knew there were still three or four hours before it would be time to get up. He opened his eyes. Yes, it was not yet daylight. A silvery twilight filtered in through the half-drawn window-curtains, restoring something of their shape and solidity to the dark objects in the room and barring the walls and ceiling with bands and blots of pale grey, like the tangled limbs of a huge, ghostly octopus. In the bed a yard away from his own lay Rosamund, his wife, her head showing black against the pearl-grey of sheets and pillow. But Christopher had not remembered her presence, for he had fallen, hypnotised perhaps by the unfamiliar look in that pallid twilight of the things about him, into one of those rare moods of self-awareness in which a man feels himself to be utterly alone, a quivering pulse of life in an inanimate world. It seemed, at that timeless hour of neither day nor night, as though life had shuffled off all its

stale incrustations of custom and habit and become again for an hour a free and vivid thing. Custom, the octopus, had relaxed its deadly hold : raising his eyes to the ceiling again, he saw it hanging, with its shadowy tentacles arched, above him, innocuous and aloof until daylight and the deadening routine of day had restored its powers. It was as if the rush of the years had slackened and stood still, so that for the first time in his married life he could pause, look backwards and forwards and take stock, compare for the first time what he had become with what he had once hoped to become, admit to himself that, blinded and deafened by the ceaseless flow of time, he had unprotestingly allowed life to practise upon him a monstrous delusion. Was it pain or pleasure, this palpitating sense of life which, as he lay there, possessed him with an almost unendurable intensity ?

Pleasure ? It was too sharp for pleasure. No, it was pain, a pain of the mind so keenly insistent that it was already, he felt, beginning to have its physical equivalent, a smarting and tingling of the chest and of some centre of feeling inside his body. It was the pain of impulses and desires unexpressed, and so thrust back upon their source where they had soured and fermented till they poisoned him. Christopher took a long, slow breath, filling his chest, and then expelled it in a long sigh. A terrible sense of waste and futility came over him. He was stranded. Month by month and year by year life was passing him by. In a few days he would be forty. Which day ? Was it to-morrow ? What was the date to-day ? Yesterday was the eighth. Why it was to-day : to-day was his birthday, and it was to-night that

they were having the dinner party over which, a week ago, he and Rosamund had narrowly avoided a quarrel.

Thinking of his wife and her untiring antagonism, Christopher sighed wearily again. He felt himself idle, unused both in body and mind. He had an immense capacity for love : to love and to be loved was the great necessity of his being ; but now he had been deprived of both. Rosamund no longer wanted his love. She had ceased to love him years ago, and had ceased at the same time to tolerate the love he offered her. His mother, whom he had loved dearly, was dead. There was nobody now on whom he could squander the love which burdened his heart. To be robbed of the opportunity of giving was, to his generous nature, the cruellest of deprivations ; for it meant that he was denied the natural expression of all that was best in him. And his body too, he felt bitterly, was unused and wasted. Lying on his back in bed, he arched his broad, muscular thorax and tightened the muscles of his strong arms and his hard, powerful thighs. His muscles and limbs cried out to be used. Surely there was something wrong with a scheme of life which deprived a vigorous creature of the use of its vigour. Yes, alas, his body was wasted : and it was wasted not only because it was not used for physical labour, because its muscles, created to conquer and bend to man's use the weight and hardness of the material world, were without their rightful occupation, but because no woman loved it and took pleasure in it and desired to possess and be possessed by it. Christopher had always had a pagan innocence of mind about

physical things. He had looked forward to a full and complete life with Rosamund, a life that satisfied both mind and body. He had hoped, too, for children ; but Rosamund had denied him children as she had so soon denied him love. What a stagnation his life had become. His birthday ! He smiled grimly. A birthday was a joyless event nowadays ; nothing more than a reminder of the terrifying fact that life was eluding him, leaving him behind before he had fully tasted it.

He turned on to his left side, heaving the bedclothes up about his right shoulder, and suddenly his mind dropped back to his childhood. He could recall exactly the particular sensations which attended the birthdays of those times, the disguised excitement at the prospect of presents, the shyness and embarrassment at having temporarily emerged from his usual place in the family circle and become the centre of attention and affectionate, but slightly formal, goodwill. He would have preferred to creep away and open his parcels in private, but such a thing, he knew, was out of the question, for it was due to the givers that they should have him under observation, waiting eagerly for his appreciation as he unwrapped each present. And how difficult it was, in these formal circumstances, to express that appreciation and to thank the giver properly. Yes (he smiled as he recalled it), it was certainly embarrassing, but yet delightful too.

In those days they lived in an atmosphere of love, a charming, warm, half-humorous love which remained always fresh and clean. It was to their mother that they owed that. How delightful that gay

humour of hers had been : it had added the faintest little sting to the warm impulsiveness of her love, preserved a marvellous poise between sarcasm and sentimentality, and aroused in her children both warmth of heart and a hardiness of mind. How clearly he remembered the gentle banter in her voice as, having hugged him and wished him many happy returns, she held him at arm's length, her hands on his shoulders, and asked : " Well, and how is my birthday-boy this morning ? "

Quite seriously to have called him a birthday-boy would have been unpardonable sentimentality, but that little tinge of humour in her tone, as though she were laughing at herself, abolished shame and kindled a kind of warm mirth. He remembered the very feel of her hands and of her cheek when she pressed her face against his, as though his flesh had taken the very mould of them. And her laugh too was indelibly printed on his hearing, the laugh that so gently and gaily overrode childish complaints and whimperings. At the mere thought of her he was wrapped in a warm happiness which thawed the springs of memory till a tide of half-forgotten things brimmed up and engulfed him.

He was lying in his cot in the night-nursery : he had awoken and found the room in darkness and the house very quiet. It seemed that he had been in bed a very long time : soon perhaps it would be time to get up. His father, who had been away all day fishing, had not returned when he had been put to bed. Then he had heard quiet steps on the stairs, and the door had opened softly and slowly. His father came up to his cot with a candle and

looked down at him. " Hallo, George," he said (his father called him by a great variety of names—any name, in fact, that came first) " what are you doing awake at this time of day ? " And without a word more he had lifted him up and perched him on his shoulder, and they had gone slowly and carefully downstairs. How immensely high up it had seemed on his father's shoulder : the house, from that point of view, had looked entirely different. He had been surprised to find the lamp still lit in the hall and to see that a bright light came from the half-open doorway of the dining-room. Christopher had wondered what grown-up people did in the house at such hours, and if they ever went to bed. The drawing-room door opened and his mother came into the hall. " William, how naughty ! " she had said serenely.

" Just to have a look at the fish ! " his father had replied. " Besides, I found him awake " ; and, with Christopher still on his shoulder, he turned into the dining-room. " Mind your head ! " he said, and Christopher still recalled with what wonder and delight he touched the top of the doorway as his father ducked so as to get him through. They proceeded to the sideboard, and there on a huge dish, arranged in a row, the biggest on the left and the smallest on the right, lay eleven beautiful fishes with brown backs and silvery-golden bellies and rosy spots on their sides.

" Well, what do you think of that, old man ? " said his father.

Christopher remained silent with wonder. " Are they real fish ? " he asked at last.

"Quite real, old man!" said his father. "Like one for your breakfast?"

"Yes!" whispered Christopher ecstatically.

When his father had carried him back to bed he had asked shyly: "May I really have one for breakfast?"

"Really and truly, Thomas!"

"May I have the baby one?"

"By all means; and Mother and I will have the big father one."

"Is it nearly breakfast-time yet?" Christopher asked.

"Lord, no!" laughed his father. "But the quicker you go to sleep, the sooner breakfast will come; so you'll do what you can for us, won't you?"

The emotional essence of that first of all remembered experiences was alive in him yet. Even the very words that belonged to those early years were charged with meaning. The memories roused by the words night-nursery and day-nursery were much more than accurate pictures of the rooms and their contents: they were a whole scale of unique sensations, a living part of him, a vital element in the cluster of experiences which constituted the man he now was. *Day-nursery* implied not only the green-painted wire guard, with its brass top, which stood before the nursery fire and gave out a harsh and formidable hum when you strummed its wires with a stick, not only the dapple-grey rocking-horse with its mangy tail, not only the great grained and varnished wardrobe whose bottom drawer was the toy-drawer, not only the dark cupboard with the mousy smell which housed boots and shoes and hats

and coats and, on the top shelf, unopened pots of jam—not only these things in themselves, but also a whole gamut of sensations and spiritual flavours, hopes and fears and strange elations, a whole rich section of his infant life.

In the space between the wardrobe and the window, fenced off with chairs to represent a church, their mother had been shocked and amused to find him and Janet celebrating Holy Communion with a slice of bread and butter and a mug of milk. And there was another game, a game which roused in him a peculiar and unaccountable ecstasy, the game of " Going a Journey." It was an immense journey, a journey to remote and unexplored lands, and a great deal of baggage had to be taken. The baggage consisted of the entire contents of the toy-drawer. Every shape and kind of toy was tumbled out—dolls whose skirts had become entangled in railway-engines and clock-work frogs, wooden blocks of various sizes and colours, boxes of bricks, other boxes that leaked tin cavalry and tin infantry, farm stock, barns, gates, and tin trees ; these and all the other toys were packed under the belly of the rocking-horse or tied on to the saddle. It was play, but it was play of such seriousness that even their thoughts and sensations co-operated in the make-believe. The immense preparation for the journey, the labour of loading the horse securely and scientifically so that nothing fell off when they got into motion, the sense of the long, monotonous days of travel in front of them, the desperate hardships, the wonderful sights and experiences, were things intensely real to Christopher. But the goal to which

they travelled was what gave to the whole thing its indescribable magic. That place Christopher did not attempt to describe or even to think of: it was a thrilling and mysterious land beyond imagination and beyond dreams. Nothing but the ecstatic sense of it could have made worth while the labour of coping with that mass of refractory toys. And when at last all was complete, the huge caravan loaded, the travellers ready at last to abandon home and comfort and friends for the sake of the great quest, he and Janet seated themselves on either end of the green rockers and the tremendous journey began. Up and down, up and down they rocked, and as they rocked they sang to themselves a strange, monotonous, wordless song. Days and nights passed over them. Sometimes they stopped to tighten the girths or secure some item of baggage that had shaken loose, or to eat a hasty meal squatting in the hot desert sand or eagerly snatch a drink from one of the rare springs. Then the weary journey would be continued, the nights and days would resume their slow flight, while nothing but the droning song of the travellers and the dull rumble of the rockers on the nursery oilcloth broke the appalling silence.

Janet was always the first to lose interest. She would begin by insisting on unwarrantable halts, and when she had dismounted it became more and more difficult to persuade her to remount. At last, quite suddenly, Christopher tired too. The ecstasy went out like a blown candle, the high, unimaginable ideal became meaningless and all the willing endeavour a foolish and tedious drudgery. Then, with

a feeling of cold disgust, Christopher found himself face to face with flat, unmitigated realism, with the horrible fact of that mass of toys, every one of which, with never a flash of the visionary gleam to lighten his labours, he must unload and stow again in the toy-drawer, with what help he could extract from the bored and shiftless Janet.

On a later occasion—he must have been about seven at the time—he set out in much more realistic fashion for the unknown. It was during the summer holidays when they were all staying at Shanklin. Sarah the housemaid had gone with them to look after the children in the absence of Miss Billings, the nursery-governess, who was away on holiday. Every morning at half-past nine Christopher and his sister set out in Sarah's charge, with spades and pails, into a world of dazzling sunshine and sparkling sea to build out of wet sand imperfect copies of their dreams. The forts and castles they succeeded in making were poor things beside the intricate and many-towered fortresses which they planned, fortresses so huge that both of them, and Sarah too, could easily have got inside and would have been invisible even when standing up. More than once Christopher had marked out on the sand the plan of one of these grandiose conceptions, and he and Janet had got to work on it ; but there had always come a moment, after a long and laborious digging, when he realised that they had taken on a hopeless task, that the castle was growing so slowly that it would never be finished, that dinner-time would have found it little more than begun and the afternoon tide would be eating away its bastions before

it was half-built. When the cold truth had dawned upon him he had sadly abandoned the too ambitious dream, and, turning their backs on the vast unsightly mounds, he and Janet had moved away to where the sand was smooth and unscarred and had soberly begun work on a smaller and more practical structure.

Near the pier, boats of various names and sizes—the *Mary Ann*, the *Pearl*, the *Seamew*, and the *Amazon Queen* which had red cushions and a white rail round the stern—were drawn up on the beach waiting to be hired. Sometimes Christopher would wander away, leaving Janet with Sarah—who sat in the dry sand with a basket beside her, eternally knitting—and would inspect these boats, occasionally climbing into them ; and one day, when the tide was so high that the *Seamew* was actually in the water and floating, he had paddled out to her. Then, quite suddenly, he realised the marvellous opportunity which lay before him. He shot a quick glance down the shore, and noted with satisfaction that Sarah and Janet were out of sight, and that Smith, the man who looked after the boats, was nowhere to be seen. Then with all his strength he pulled the *Seamew's* anchor out of the flooded sand, heaved it noisily into the boat, and climbed in after it. A boat-hook lay across the seats. He snatched it up and began feverishly pushing out. The small incoming waves struck the bows of the *Seamew* with a smart slap and threw showers of bright drops into the boat. Then came a larger one ; the boat lifted on the flood, and Christopher felt her lurch seawards on the retiring wave. He was resolved to go straight ahead

on a voyage of exploration. No doubt if he rowed hard he would reach some island in time for dinner, and after that he would re-embark and forge onwards night and day towards the enchanted lands beyond.

But it was not so easy as he had expected. The boat received the next wave sideways : Christopher felt her shudder at the thump of it, and then, like a flung spadeful of pebbles, a shower of sea-water burst all over him, driving straight through his jersey to his skin. He scrambled noisily over loose boards and seats, determined to get into the bows and push the *Seamew* round to face the sea ; but he slipped on the wet wood, lost his balance, and fell with a volley of loud, hollow bumps into the bottom of the boat. At the same time he felt her swing sharply round, and to his great surprise a deep voice came from somewhere just above him. " Now, young man," it said, " what are you after ? You don't want to go and get yourself drownded, do you ? "

Christopher rolled to a sitting position. He was very red in the face and felt very much ashamed of himself. Smith, the man who looked after the boats, was standing in the water looking down at him, with one hand on the peak of the bows. " Well, what were you up to, eh ? " he asked.

" Only playing," said Christopher shamefacedly. Not for the world would he have admitted what he had really been up to, for neither Smith nor any other grown-up person would have understood.

It was strange how many of these early memories had for their theme that leap of the heart towards a wonder felt but unimagined, that ecstasy which was

both a spiritual aspiration and a physical sensation. He recalled how he had awoken one morning to find the ceiling above his bed strangely cold and bright. He heard the clink of spoons and cups and saucers. The door between the two nurseries was open : Nurse was laying the breakfast. He had got up, and, going to the day-nursery window, had been entranced by the spectacle of a new world. The familiar garden had become a glittering fairyland. Lawns, shrubs, trees, walls, and garden-seat had been remodelled in a single soft white substance. There were no paths, no flower-beds : the ground was one unbroken bed of soft, unstirring whiteness which rose into waves and mounds, sank into downy hollows, leapt into domes and spires and pagodas deeply cushioned and sagging under the weight and thickness of the snowfall. He felt even now the strange elation which had taken hold of him : it was the same unaccountable ecstasy which he had felt on those far journeys on the rocking-horse. After breakfast, he and Janet had dragged the nursery table to the window, lifted two stools on to it, and, climbing up, had seated themselves before the dazzling scene. They were at the theatre ; the motionless scene before them was a play, and its name was "Boadicea." Why "Boadicea"? Christopher wondered, as he turned restlessly in the vain attempt to find the perfect position for sleep. Sleep eluded him. His mind, caught into those old memories, had grown too active ; and now other ghosts rose up, kindled, took on warmth and life, greeted his mind's eye, enthrallingly familiar. He saw a small, eight-sided lantern, each side a slim

pane of coloured glass—red, green, blue, or yellow. At the age of eight it had seemed to him a thing of mysterious beauty. He had shown it proudly to his friend Alec Winter, and, lighting the candle, they had carried it into the garden and hung it to a shrub, and, as it twirled slowly on its string, its changing light, pallid and subtle in the sunny light of day, had shown him a secret and unearthly loveliness. Then a wonderful idea had struck him. "I say," he had said to Alec, "I know what we'll do. We'll hang it up in the oak by the gate."

The oak by the gate was a huge, many-branched tree, easy to climb. Christopher climbed first, with the lantern hooked to one of the buttons of his jacket. "Now," he said, when they were about fifteen feet above the ground, "I'll hang it here, and we'll pretend it's a shrine. Then I'll climb up on this side and you climb up on that, and we'll stay there and say prayers."

Alec diligently obeyed. Christopher, perched in his chosen place, could see the lantern shining faintly like a magic jewel in a bower of leaves, and beyond it and a little above it he saw one leg and part of the jersey of Alec. Then for a long time there was silence. Christopher had said all sorts of prayers, and from time to time he glanced across to make sure that Alec's leg and the bit of his jersey were still there. At last Alec's voice disturbed his devotions. "I say, I'm going to climb up higher," it said, and Christopher understood that Alec had had enough of it. That was the worst of it; everyone always tired of these things before he himself did.

Afterwards, as they were going in to tea, Christopher had glanced enquiringly at Alec. " I say," he asked, " did you say real prayers ? "

" Real prayers ? Of course I didn't," said Alec. And Christopher had felt that this lack of self-surrender in Alec had utterly shattered the true mystery of the thing.

What an absurdity. And yet he felt the indescribable significance of it even now at the age of forty. Things in those days had intense reality, high seriousness : they branded themselves ineffaceably upon the heart. Father, Mother, Nurse, Tweed (the name of a Collie of those days), day-nursery, night-nursery, the store-room—words such as these were alive, real, laden with emotions and suggestions which stimulated the mind into a state of trembling sensibility. Why was it that everything was then so vivid ? Was it because in childhood one was still learning the world, faithfully and intently collecting every appeal to the sense as so much material out of which to build a manageable and coherent microcosm, as a bird collects hairs and twigs and moss for its nest ? That perhaps was one explanation, but was it not also that the senses at that early age were unworn and unblurred, the mind a virgin substance that took the imprint of the minutest shape and pattern ? He turned his thoughts sleepily to later experiences—to his school-days, to Cambridge. They were vague, blunted, of a grosser stuff ; their recollection gave off none of the penetrating emotional force with which the spirit of those early years assailed the senses. Beginning at last to settle towards sleep, his mind wandered like a ghost in

the home of his childhood, and he noticed for the first time that his earliest memories of inanimate things were of things far below a man's level of vision, things on the ground, or not more than three feet from the ground. Suddenly, with no conscious effort of memory, he knew again the very shape and colour and nature of the handle of the front-door ; not the outer door, which was kept open all day, but the inner glass-panelled door. That handle had once been on a level with his eyes, and to turn it and open the door had once been a marvellous achievement. It was loose and rattled to the touch : he remembered with perfect exactness the very noise of it. The brass stair-rods, with their conical ends. The feeling of trying to force one end back into its eye when it had slipped out. The streaks of bare wood appearing through the white paint on either side of the stair-carpet, where the paint had been rubbed away by the housemaid when she polished the brass eyes. The little iron grating under the front door step, which let air into the wine-cellar. He remembered pulling up the tiny grass plants which grew about it and pushing pebbles through it so as to hear them drop on the cellar floor. The high brass-railed fender in the dining-room with the brass knobs at each corner. The knob on the right was immovable, but the one on the left could easily be unscrewed. All those things which, when he grew up, had receded to a distance of three or four or five feet from his eyes, had been things of wondering study, patient experiment, intimate acquaintance when he was barely three feet high and scrambled up and downstairs on his hands and knees. He had

no clear knowledge of such things in his present house. But now, as he slipped away into semi-consciousness, they returned to him in all their vivid reality, and not only solid objects, but sounds and smells. The sweet, faded smell of the drawing-room, which was always strongest near the beautiful table inlaid with red and green marble, on which stood the large blue-and-white Chinese jar with the pierced ebony cover. The smell of the bathroom, a sweet soapy smell, with the faintest hint of stale slops lurking under the fragrance. The particular brisk clatter when you pulled the single cord of a lowered Venetian blind and all the laths simultaneously turned over, suddenly and completely altering the quality of the twilight in the room. Twilight . . . venetian twilight . . . Chinese twilight . . . Twinese twilight. . . . He sank deeper and deeper into unconsciousness.

"Chris!" He started violently. Someone had spoken his name aloud in his ear. He opened sleepy eyes. It was nothing: imagination! He closed his eyes again and sank . . . and sank . . . through green depths of water.

CHAPTER II

When he woke again he opened his eyes to a blaze of sunlight which lay in a wide river across his pillow. Dazzled by the glare, he moved his head into the shadow, and gradually, as his sight cleared, the bedroom grouped itself clearly before him. Good God ! what was he doing there, what had he been doing all those years in that room so utterly alien to him ? The dimness and mystery which had filled it when he lay dreaming and remembering, four hours ago, were gone. The room and the things in it had shrunk and dwindled into the commonplace of actuality. Each object had its unchangeable shape and its hard, particular colour, and answered his gaze with relentless and bigoted obstinacy, daring him to deny its reality. Rosamund's mahogany furniture was expensive and well made, but it was shallow and insincere, a modern mimicry of a dead period. The rose-pink of the carpet produced in Christopher a kind of sickness of the soul. He longed for the honesty of bare boards and furniture plain and battered by the use of humble generations. He rose on one elbow and looked across at his wife's bed.

An unknown woman lay with her face towards him ; she was still asleep. Yes, unknown, a stranger ; and yet the woman was his wife. He realised with a shock that, though he had lived with her for seven

years, she was utterly unfamiliar. Her face was unmasked to him now and he began to study it, rediscovering forms and aspects long forgotten and noting the changes which had overlaid features once known and loved. How beautiful once he had thought her eyes, set wide apart under the pure arch of her brows. In those brows and in the forehead there was something of the great lady, a nobility which, he noticed now, was belied by the eye-sockets, for they were too shallow. Yes, there was a hint of the superficial in the modelling of the eye-sockets and the temples. The nose was good ; strongly yet delicately designed. The mouth—Christopher remembered how he had once loved its charming petulance. Now the petulance had coarsened into fretfulness and stubbornness. It was the mouth of a woman hardened, bad-tempered, and prematurely aged. In it he seemed to see concentrated the qualities which had turned her so suddenly and so relentlessly against him.

With what terrible suddenness she had turned. The change had come upon him with the unforeseen precipitancy of a disaster, freezing his heart and demolishing his happiness in a single day. In course of time he had recovered a sort of dull equanimity, but the old superabundant delight in the very fact of life was gone ; and at the thought of the lamentable unfulfilment of his life the bitter fountain of pain welled up again in his heart and flooded his being. Then he felt a sudden pang of hatred for his wife, and he glanced at her again. Her mouth hung slightly open, like the gasping mouth of a fish out of water. He felt grimly pleased to see her so ugly,

and he imagined wounding things to say to her in revenge for the cruel things she so often flung at him. "Really, Christopher," she would say to him when she had said something that hurt him, "*need* you look at me with that hang-dog expression?"

He flushed with anger now at the thought of those words. Why did he never retaliate? Why, next time she made that particular remark, should he not reply: "What does it matter, Rosamund, what I look like or what anyone looks like? You're not always exactly lovely yourself, you know. I was looking at you when you were alseep the other morning, and—well, to say the least of it, you were no beauty, I can tell you."

How surprised she would be. He pictured the look of hatred that would gather in her face. Throughout all these years he had never retaliated when she attacked him: he had determined from the first to make every allowance, to show her every consideration. But had that, after all, been the best thing to do? If he had always paid her back in kind, might it not have produced a compromise which would have been more endurable than their present relation. Better still, perhaps, if he had carried the war into the enemy's country and responded with a violence greater than hers, treating her even with physical violence till he had utterly subdued her. That, perhaps, she would have respected: perhaps even—perverse creature that she was—it would have liberated the love she so jealously hoarded. Yes, he almost believed now that the greatest kindness he could have done her would have been to have ruthlessly broken her pride. And

what a release it would have been for him. All the despair and bitterness and anger which he had so faithfully repressed would have escaped and dissipated themselves naturally, instead of stagnating in the dark reservoirs of his heart till his whole life had become poisoned.

Poison! That, as he had learned from these unhappy years, was the effect of all emotion unexpended in action. But what had he to do with action nowadays? The only action in his life was a sluggish come-and-go between home and office. Oh, the immense tedium of an occupation which uses only the brain, which condemns the body—the noble, animal part of man, with its vigorous beauty, its tense muscles, and its hot desires—to moulder behind roofs and walls, sprawling unused in a chair from morning till evening! How much better for body and mind to be a labourer who is paid, even though he is paid little, to use the limbs and muscles that cry out to be used, that turn on the mind and torture it when denied usage. And yet, though Christopher ardently desired physical labour and a hard, simple life, he knew too well that he would make no effort to obtain them, for the curse of inaction and of Custom paralysed his initiative: the Octopus bound him body, hand, and foot with its eight tentacles. Men in his position did not, after all, break away and follow their random desires. The man who did would be considered mad. And he *would* be mad, for madness is nothing more than a departure from the normal. Only the man who had the courage to fling away his crippling sanity and embrace a noble madness could escape from this

life-long imprisonment. What was it, he asked himself, that held him back? Was it cowardice? Or was it not rather a sense of duty towards Rosamund? He did not know: the inhibition was too dark and deep for him to probe it. Yet he had delved deeply into himself during the last six years, and he had a clearer self-knowledge than most men. His nature was not of a kind that submits without a struggle to despair; and, because he had tried from the beginning to understand and to behave towards Rosamund and towards himself not as the feelings of the moment dictated, but as a deeper prompting—the voice perhaps of a divine Reason—had urged, he had gathered much of that dark, interior knowledge which is the flower of suffering. There was indeed something of the saint in Christopher: he was accustomed to set himself arduous standards of behaviour, and now, as he lay ruminating upon these mysteries, the saint in him began to speak, telling him that it was better to be poisoned for righteousness' sake than to preserve health of the mind by the indulgence of weakness. True goodness, he reflected, is always dangerous: it is as sharp as a razor, devouring as flame: only the perfect man can handle it unscathed. But even to the least perfect the handling of it brings its own supreme reward. The perfect man, faced by the disaster which had befallen Christopher himself, would have had no despair or bitterness or anger to repress, for his love would have expected no return: it would have been a free giving untainted by any counterclaim. A fine ideal; but such love is beyond the scope of imperfection. He had sometimes tried to behave towards

Rosamund with that perfection of love, and the impossibility of it had been evident at once. He had discovered that a man cannot be perfect by behaving as if he were. That, it seemed, merely led to artificiality and a kind of priggishness, for in endeavouring so to act he had been acting on a theory instead of acting out of the heat of impulse. And so it seemed that a man must become perfect before he could act perfectly : the change must first be wrought in his soul, for he can change his acts by changing his soul, but he cannot change his soul by changing his acts. Behaviour cannot create impulse : it can only be honest when it follows impulse. And yet, how difficult it is to act honestly ; for which of the conflicting impulses that strive simultaneously for expression is the voice of honesty ?

But thornier questions remained. What of evil impulses ? Even though it might be good for the evil man to express his emotions in action, it would not be good for those whom his actions might damage. If the murderer alone is considered, murder may well be a curative action, a first step in the diseased mind's return to health. Therapeutic murder ! The question began to have comic possibilities. And then there is that other question, the tremendous question which man has pursued since the creation : how is a man to change his soul ? That surely is beyond his power, a matter for God alone. Thenceforward thought declines towards the dead-end of fatalism.

Christopher rolled over fretfully, bewildered by the inevitable paradoxes which lie in wait for the moralist.

Reflection among these darkly hidden matters always ended, he remembered wearily, in insoluble dilemma. Such matters were beyond the scope of thought. He drew a slow, deep breath, and, closing his eyes, moved his head into the broad band of sunshine which crossed his pillow. He always felt relieved and released when thought proved itself inadequate. This discovery, which he was always making over again, recalled to him the infinite mystery and the untamable energy of life ; and every time he tore himself free from the snaring nets of thought, he felt a sudden lightening of the heaviness and gloom in which these bouts of confused thought always eventually plunged him. His mind cleared ; all its turbid sediment sank away, and soon it was empty of thoughts and questions, limpid as the water of a well.

He lay with his eyes shut, staring at the warm, pure redness of his closed eyelids illuminated by the sun. He felt the warmth of the sunlight on his face : it crept through his hair to his scalp, bringing with it the sense of summer and the country, the sense of waking with a whole summer day before one, a great tract of country to run wild in, green leaves luminous in sunlight, sunlight on moving water, the cool touch of the air in the shadowy places of deep woods, the sudden change to warmth and fragrance when the wood is left behind for a warm, gorse-scented common. What would he not give to celebrate the coming day, his birthday, by a long, solitary ramble in the fields?—solitary, or, better still, with someone deeply loved who loved him in return—his mother, or Rosamund as she had been

once in that brief, delicious time before and after their marriage, hardly two years in all.

A knock at the door recalled him sharply from his dreaming. It was Annie, the housemaid, coming to call them. There was a movement in the bed next to his, and Rosamund's voice called a sleepy "Come in!" On an instantaneous impulse Christopher turned away from her and drew up the bedclothes about his head. He lay stock-still, though he longed to stir his body and settle it into a comfortable position. He had closed his eyes, but he could tell exactly, from the familiar noises, what the soft-footed and efficient Annie was doing. After an agony of waiting, he heard the door open and shut again. Annie had gone, and he stirred himself cautiously, trying to produce the impression that he was stirring in his sleep. He felt desperately that the invasion of the present must be postponed to the last possible moment. The eight-limbed monster was watching for him, but he could elude it for twenty minutes more, for Rosamund always went to the bathroom before him. The sound of stirring bedclothes came from her bed. She was getting up, and next moment he heard her soft slippers brushing the carpet; there was a clinking from the direction of the washing-stand, more brushing of slippers on the carpet, and then the click and snap of the opening door. The door shut, and suddenly the room was flooded with a divine emptiness. He felt it close round him, exquisitely kind and consoling. He could open his eyes and stir his body safely now, and throw back the hot bedclothes from his face and chest with impunity.

How delicious the sunshine was this morning. The air, even in the bedroom, had a fresh, springtime quality, and Christopher, once more for a moment oblivious of his surroundings, had the illusion that he was far from streets and noise and smoke, and that if he were to go to the window he would see green meadows and shining streams spreading before him into a distance of violet hills. In a moment he would throw back the bedclothes and leap from bed with that vividly remembered holiday feeling of his youth. And after a cold bath he would set out into the deep, peaceful country, and at the end of the day he would find his mother waiting for him and a small, delightful party gathered there for his birthday.

So he lay, dreaming with open eyes, till a distant metallic snap shattered the illusion. It was the bolt of the bathroom door : Rosamund was coming back ; and next moment she entered the bedroom. "Your bath's running, Christopher," she said, turning to her dressing-table.

When Christopher, having got out of bed and put on his slippers and dressing-gown, passed her chair, she did not turn her head, and, glancing into the mirror before which she sat, he saw her reflected face, cold and expressionless as a mask.

CHAPTER III

There is great virtue in a cold bath. Christopher, standing naked in the bathroom after his cold plunge and scrubbing himself strenuously with a rough towel, realised, as he so often did, that, though all his ambitions had been defeated, life still offered minor consolations. The patient animal in us is always ready to respond to the smallest attention. The healthy shock of the cold water and the stimulus of scrubbing and being scrubbed with a rough towel made Christopher's flesh tingle deliciously and stirred the flow of blood through his arteries and veins till his body glowed and blushed with well-being. He threw away the towel, bent his arms with the fists clenched above his shoulders and luxuriously stretched all the muscles in his strong, well-made body. It was delightful to be naked on a day like this : he hated the thought of putting on clothes and disguising himself as a respectable and sober business man. Nakedness and conventionality are utterly incompatible. Naked we belong to nature ; it is not until a man is dressed, and respectably dressed, that he comes under the dull dominion of custom. A delicious scent of frying bacon and toasting toast floated in through the open window from the kitchen window below it, and again the animal responded with a thrill of desire and Christopher became aware

that he was hungry. Thank God, the joy of food and drink remained. It was impossible, fortunately, to be uniformly miserable. A hundred little flaws of pleasure—pleasures of sight, sound, taste, smell, touch, and thought—mar with rainbow jags and flaws the cold, pure crystal of pain. Even the man most in love with misery cannot escape the small thrill of pleasure that comes from sinking into a deep armchair, standing up and stretching, swallowing a cool, delicious drink, tasting good food, gazing at a beautiful face or a beautiful body, or autumn woods or mountains seen beyond lakes ; for body and soul are waiting like strung harps to tremble into tune at the lightest touch. Christopher was not in love with misery, but he sometimes forgot in his moods of depression how many pleasant distractions life still afforded. But no man who is not utterly heartless and soulless can live by these alone.

While Christopher, in shirt and trousers, was brushing his hair before the looking-glass in his dressing-room, the gong sounded for breakfast. He wondered if Rosamund had remembered that to-day was his birthday. Perhaps, if she was not in one of her sulky moods, she would wish him many happy returns at breakfast. That would be cheering. It would bring them together for a while. He went downstairs, shaking out the folds of a clean handkerchief, and arrived in the dining-room as Rosamund was blowing out the lamp under the silver kettle. The fragrance of freshly made coffee filled the room. Rosamund always made the coffee herself, and she made it to perfection.

She did not turn her head as he entered, and

Christopher felt, or thought he felt, the presence of a cold hostility in the room. His heart sank. He went to the side-table and lifted the covers of two dishes. Under one there was bacon and under the other fish-cakes. O blessed, blessed food, balm of sorrow ! A fish-cake was exactly what he felt inclined for ; and bacon, thin bacon, perfectly fried, went so admirably with fish-cakes. " Can I bring you a fish-cake, Rosie ? " he asked over his shoulder.

" No, thanks," said Rosamund, " I'll look after myself." And at once he knew, from long familiarity with the different tones of her voice, that it was one of her sulky days.

At the sound of Christopher's voice a little shiver of anger had shaken Rosamund. " Why can't he leave me alone ? " she thought. " Why can't he keep quiet ? "

She was often angry with him for no reason, a blind, unreasoning resentment which she had long ceased to be able to control. But this morning she had a reason for her anger, though she was not aware of it as such. She was angry with him because it was his birthday and she knew she ought to wish him many happy returns. She ought to and she wanted to, but a sulky devil in her would not allow her, made it utterly impossible for her to speak pleasantly and kindly to him. And because she could not do so she felt resentful towards him.

Two days previously she had remembered his birthday, and had determined to buy him a present. She had debated the matter for some time, for it presented many complications. It was some years since she had given him a birthday present : if she

were to do so now would it not appear to him to have some special significance? Significance of what? Of apology on her part? That must certainly be avoided. She would not admit, even to herself, that she had the smallest desire to apologise. What, indeed, was there to apologise for?

Why, then, did she wish to give him a present? She did not know. But unconsciously and obscurely she had become aware that her neglect of his birthday year after year had become too obviously deliberate. The embarrassment it caused her each year was quite as great as the inevitable awkwardness of giving him a present would be. After all, a present did not mean much. It was a common civility. One gave presents to all sorts of people.

Christopher for his part never forgot her birthday. At the thought of that she felt a little sting of irritation, just as she did when, on each of her birthdays, his present inevitably appeared. But if she gave him a present, he would be so insufferably grateful for it. How difficult it would be to accept his thanks without visible impatience.

In the end she determined at least to go out and look at the shops; she could decide later whether to buy him anything or not; and she had taken a bus to Piccadilly Circus and walked slowly up the left side of Regent Street, pausing to examine the shop-windows. The pleasant, sunny morning, the wide street half sunshine and half shadow, and the slowly moving crowds on the pavements had soothed her. She had felt calm and care-free. She paused for a long time before a window in which she had seen a

cigarette-box in green, blue, and purple enamel. It was not too expensive, and certainly it would make a nice present, just the sort of thing that Christopher would like. Should she go in and get it ? She hovered in doubt. The problem had become so absurdly involved that she found it impossible to make up her mind. What a nuisance a little thing like that could become. Suddenly she felt sick of the whole thing, and, leaving the window, she continued her walk. But when she had nearly reached Oxford Circus she turned round, went back to the shop, and, without another thought, entered and purchased the cigarette-box and carried it home. There she went to her bedroom, opened the parcel, and sat for a long time gazing at the box. Then she wrapped it up again and put it in one of the drawers in her dressing-table.

This morning she had known, as soon as she woke, that she couldn't possibly give it to him. She came upon it, still in its parcel, when she went to the drawer for a clean handkerchief, and, shutting the drawer, she went downstairs without it. No, it would have been quite impossible. She realised it infallibly now, as Christopher came over from the side-table with his plate in his hand. When she handed him his cup of coffee her eyes avoided his, and as they settled to their breakfast a heavy silence descended upon them like a pall.

Christopher dreaded these silences. That they should resign themselves first thing in the morning to this cold-blooded, deliberate, and utterly causeless feud seemed to him a monstrous and inhuman thing. And yet, when one of the two was resolved on it,

what could the other do? It was impossible, under such conditions, to talk freely and naturally, or indeed to talk at all. He began to rack his brains for something to say, some light, non-committal subject which might help to dispel the gloom. But the very essence of frivolous talk is that it springs up without premeditation : if it is deliberately sought, it eludes the seeker. As possible themes suggested themselves, Christopher dismissed them with a grim contempt. His mood was already too far removed from light-heartedness. The pretence would have been too obvious.

But might it not be possible to dispel the gloom by actually speaking of it? If they could bring themselves to recognise and admit that they were at cross-purposes and honestly try to explain what was the matter, surely their feud would be ended. But what could *he* explain? For the disease originated in her, not in him. He had done nothing this morning to cause the feud : it was Rosamund who had caused it. He had felt the hostility of her mood directly he entered the dining-room. Yet even so, if he were to raise the subject and could persuade her to speak her mind, they might be able to find reconciliation. But how was he to start? It was so difficult to speak to Rosamund. The smallest and most innocent thing he said or did was always likely to irritate her. Yes, what, after all, was the good of trying? He was overcome suddenly by the hopelessness of it, and sank without a struggle into the engulfing silence.

Rosamund, silent too, struggled obscurely with herself. A voice within her urged her to shake off the

cold pride which had gained so strong a hold upon her. Why, the voice asked, must she go on torturing both Christopher and herself? Why could she not speak to him, wish him many happy returns of his birthday, and so exorcise this devil into whose clutches she had yielded up both herself and him? But another voice, more insistent than the first, commanded her to say nothing.

"Speak now!" the first voice kept prompting—"now, before it is too late. It is becoming more difficult, more impossible every moment you let the silence continue."

Yes, it had become impossible now. How could she break through this immense silence, which every moment implied a deeper and deeper antipathy, with a sudden phrase about good wishes. It would be hopelessly, almost comically inappropriate. Then her good angel sent her an inspiration. It would be easy and natural for her to take up the morning paper that lay on the corner of the table between them, and say: "Why, to-day's the ninth. I'd quite forgotten. Many happy returns, Christopher." Once that had been said, the spell would have been shattered. But no, she could not, with all the will in the world, speak kindly to him to-day: to do so would have meant too absolute a self-abandonment, and, besides, too gross a falsification of her bitter, poisonous feelings. It was impossible, beyond a certain point, to act in defiance of one's mood. But what caused these moods? She did not know. Were they her own choice, or an imposition from outside herself? Whatever they were, they filled her soul and body with bitterness.

She was roused from her brooding by Christopher's voice. " Rosamund," he was saying, " why do we go on like this ? It's enough to break a man's heart."

She raised her eyes. He was leaning towards her and his eyes were fixed on her. One half of her, the good half, was stirred by a sense of profound relief. The difficulty had been solved with unhoped-for ease. Christopher had made the first move. All she had to do now was to respond. Her sense of fair play, every decent feeling in her, urged her to come to his help, to co-operate with him in abolishing their feud. He had made it so easy for her. Even if she could not bring herself to capitulate at once, at least she could give him some small encouragement to persist. At least she could say : " I don't know, Christopher. I can't help it." Then he would question her, and they would be able to talk the thing out. He was gazing at her still, waiting for her to answer. His arm lay on the table, the hand stretched towards her as if waiting to receive hers.

Was it that gesture which, by asking more than she could give, made her suddenly draw back and call to arms that fierce pride of hers ? Rosamund herself knew nothing of how or why the thing happened. All she knew was that the good Rosamund was suddenly silenced and that, irresistibly impelled by the evil Rosamund, she was replying with the cold, hard smile and the cold, hard voice that chilled and wounded even herself : " My dear Christopher, what *are* you talking about ? "

" You know well enough, Rosamund," he said, and she noted the appeal in his voice.

The good Rosamund's heart was deeply touched by it, but it irritated the evil Rosamund. " He's a fool, a sentimental fool ! " she whispered. " Hurt him : it will be easy to hurt him now."

And so she lied to Christopher again. " I assure you," she said, " I haven't an idea." She knew, and was pleased at the certainty, that Christopher knew she was lying. His next words proved it, for they ignored her pretended ignorance.

" Surely," he said, " if we were to talk frankly we could manage to shake off this horrible mood that seems to—to poison our lives. Won't you try to tell me what you feel ? If I can do anything—if there's anything I do that annoys you——"

Deep within her, Rosamund heard the good Rosamund quietly weeping, and, looking at Christopher, she relented. Poor old Christopher. No one, surely, could have been kinder or more patient. He had, she knew, suffered horribly during all these years, and it was she who had made him suffer. Deliberately, trading on the knowledge that he was in love with her and therefore horribly vulnerable, she had appeased her wounded pride by tormenting him. That was despicable.

But the evil Rosamund came to the rescue of her self-respect. It was his own fault, said the evil Rosamund. He had bothered her with his love when he knew she was miserable and incapable of resistance, and at last he had deluded her by his persistence into believing that he could make her happy. His behaviour, after all, had been purely selfish. He wanted her, and he had gone on worrying her until she had given in. If he suffered in consequence,

he had no one to blame but himself. Fool ! to imagine he could make her happy. That was it. He was a fool : he had no imagination. He had been incapable of appreciating the depth of her tragedy, and so, in his idiotic self-conceit, he had believed that he could make her forget it. And, more unpardonable still, he had persuaded *her*. He had actually deluded her into the belief that she was happy. She had lived under that delusion for over a year. For over a year she had been almost as big a fool as he was.

She met his gaze again, and there was a gleam of hatred in her eyes. But Christopher persisted. It seemed as if he was kindled by a kind of desperate zeal. " Come, Rosy," he repeated, " won't you try ? "

" What is it you're attempting to say, Christopher ? " She spoke impatiently, but there was the faintest tinge of indulgence in her voice.

" I'm trying to speak of this—of this hostility that keeps coming between us," he replied. He spoke hesitatingly, and his voice trembled on the aspirate of the word hostility. And Rosamund sat and listened to the ebbing of his courage under the trial which she was wilfully imposing upon him. She saw him moisten his lips.

" But what hostility ? " she said. " If there's any hostility, it's yours, I haven't said a word."

" My dear," answered Christopher, " that's just it. You haven't said a word."

Rosamund felt suddenly angry. " Well," she said, " neither have you. You haven't said a word to me to-day till just now. And why should you ?

One can't always be chattering, you know, Christopher."

"I don't want to be always chattering," he answered dully, like a sulky schoolboy. Then he kindled again. "Rosamund," he pleaded, "won't you meet me half-way? You know well enough what I'm talking about. Why pretend you don't? Be honest, dear. You owe it to us both?"

Her glance hardened again. "Owe?" she said. "I owe you nothing."

Christopher sighed wearily. "Don't let us quarrel about words," he said. "All I meant was that you could so easily help us both, if you would. Or let us say, if you prefer it, you could so easily help *me*. Even though you have ceased to love me——"

"I never loved you," she broke in, in a low, vindictive voice.

He accepted her correction. "Even though you never loved me, surely there's no reason why we shouldn't live together like friends. It would make all the difference, to *my* life at least, between contentment and—and——"

"*Your* life?" Rosamund interrupted, with a kind of pedantic discrimination of which the deliberate cruelty was obvious. "*Your* life? And what about mine? Do you ever consider me and *my* life at all, I wonder?"

He paused, as though for a moment stupefied.

"Well, and wouldn't it make a difference to yours, too?" he went on. "You surely don't mean to pretend that you enjoy treating me as you do?"

"Oh, you're a fool," she broke out, with a sudden violent exasperation. She spoke quietly, but it was not the quietness of self-control, but of a concentrated hatred. "You're so stupid; you simply don't understand. If you'd only use a little imagination. But you can't. You can think of nobody's point of view but your own. You're utterly self-centred; that's what's the matter with you."

"And what are *you*?" replied Christopher, suddenly abandoning his habitual gentleness. "You're an angel of generosity and self-sacrifice, I suppose. Your one thought, all these miserable years, has been for me, hasn't it? Whenever I've tried to be patient, whenever I've tried to make allowances and forbear (and God knows I've done it till I'm sick to death of it), you've always done your best to back me up, haven't you? You've always been generous and frank, and tried to bear with me when I accidentally irritated you. Yes, and you've always scrupulously avoided taking a mean advantage of my love for you, always done your best to control that sulky temper of yours when you knew that by indulging it you were ruining my peace of mind for whole days together, haven't you? And now, when I'm struggling to make peace between us and to rescue our lives from continual misery, you—you pretend you don't know what I'm talking about."

He stopped, breathless with his emotion and the torrent of words, and his eyes suddenly filled with tears. Rosamund, her face white to the lips, had watched him all the while with the malevolent stare of an animal at bay. Once more the two

Rosamunds strove within her. Christopher's reproaches had cut the good Rosamund to the heart. The thought of her relentless cruelty to him filled her with remorse ; for the measure of his rage now was simply the measure of what he had suffered for so long. She longed to fling away her pride, to burst into tears and implore his forgiveness. What a relief it would be to abandon all resistance. If only she could allow herself to weep, her tears would thaw that cold obstruction which imprisoned her heart as if in a block of ice, and she would become warm, happy, free, and like a child again.

But the evil Rosamund rose in revolt at the bare thought of such self-abasement, and a fury like a cold fever spread through her mind, hardening and chilling those stirrings of her humanity. Her hands and legs trembled ; her lips and eyes narrowed with hate. " You don't know what you're talking about, yourself," she retorted in a voice that shook. " You're so—so *stupid*, such a *fool*, that you can't even begin to understand. Oh, why couldn't you have left me alone ? "

" Left you alone, Rosamund ? " Christopher was bewildered.

" Yes, when I told you I didn't want to marry you, why did you go on worrying me ? If you hadn't been so utterly selfish, if you had thought for a moment of me instead of yourself——"

Christopher had been staring at her incredulously. Now his lips narrowed. " Don't be a fool ! " he said angrily. " I was no more selfish than any other man or woman in love. I wanted to devote my life to you

and to try to make you happy. Is there anything unpardonably selfish about that ? "

" Perhaps not," said Rosamund. " But it was selfishness that made you go on pestering me when I said no."

" Damn it, woman, there was nothing to prevent your saying no again. If you had said it with any determination, if you had shown that my insistence seriously annoyed you, you know perfectly well that you could have been rid of me at any moment. But you didn't want to be rid of me ; not you ! To have me dangling after you flattered your vanity, and so you gave me just enough encouragement to keep me in doubt. Good Lord, Rosamund, you weren't a child. You were an independent and responsible woman of twenty-eight, and a very artful one too. And yet, whenever you speak of our marriage you pretend that you were a poor helpless little victim in the hands of a villain. By the way you talk, I might have gagged you and raped you. Why can't you look at life honestly ? "

Rosamund's lips curled contemptuously. " Why can't I agree with your particular point of view ; that's what you mean. If only you were a little less smug about your own point of view and tried to have some consideration for other people's——"

Christopher laughed bitterly. " I've spent six years in considering yours, and a precious lot of thanks I've had for my pains. When I think of the way I've given in to your wishes, even to the point of dropping some of my old friends because they weren't smart enough for your idea of social success, I realise that I'm not only a fool, but a swine. Why,

look at the people who are coming to dinner to-night—my birthday-party, if you please. There's not one of my old friends among them. When I suggested the Branders, you objected, and I gave in. The same with Alan Wilson and his wife. The same with George Bayles. Have you ever once given in to me? Never. I've spent my life in trying to please you, trying to win your affection, and what have I got out of it? Nothing. I'm forty to-day, and my life, for all the use it is to me, is over. Yes, you're right, Rosamund. You're fond of telling me I'm stupid, unimaginative, a fool. I sometimes wonder that you aren't sick of repeating those three words, week in, week out, like a parrot. But you're right, all the same. I *am* stupid and unimaginative and a fool—a damned fool—or I wouldn't be here."

He pushed his chair back from the table and rose to his feet. Rosamund observed him with cold hatred. "Well, I'm glad you realise that, at last," she said maliciously.

Christopher went out without replying, and Rosamund, leaving her breakfast unfinished, rose and went over to the fireplace, where she stood with one elbow on the mantelpiece, her hand supporting her head. She was trembling all over. It was the first time in all their married life that Christopher had turned on her, and she was furious at his presumption and also a little alarmed. Gradually her agitation died down, but still she stood in the same position, one foot on the fender, her chin propped on her hand, her mind revolving and revolving in a narrow circle of inarticulate resentment. She had stood there for some minutes when she heard the front-door

open and shut, and, glancing towards the window, she had a fleeting glimpse of Christopher as he passed by outside. Her eyes turned to the clock on the mantelpiece beside her. It was only a quarter to nine. He had left the house half an hour before his usual time.

CHAPTER IV

Christopher hurried up the western side of the square, the side on which he lived ; turned to the right at the top, and, when he had reached the north-east corner, cut along the little curving passage called Raphael Street, which emerges almost opposite the Knightsbridge tube station. It was his usual route to his office, which was in Lincoln's Inn Fields. As a rule he took a 19 bus at the top of Sloane Street, which landed him, in about twenty minutes, within a brief walk of his office. Seven years previously, when he and Rosamund had come with a house agent's " order to view " to look over the house in which they now lived, they had approached it by this very way, and Christopher had been delighted to discover that unsuspected little triangular area of old-fashioned streets and squares hidden away between the two great prosperous modern thoroughfares. The eastern extremity of Raphael Street separates the gateway of Tattersall's on the left from the public-house called " The Pakenham " on the right.

The heavy stucco-coated front of " The Pakenham," with its two great bow-windows reaching from the pavement to the roof, transports the beholder at once to Georgian times. One expects to see clean-shaven and heavily-bewigged gentlemen like Gibbon

appear at the bow-windows on the first floor. The stucco of the first storey is nowadays painted a dark blood-colour ; and all above that is cream. Over the third-storey windows, in large letters, runs the legend HOTEL & TAVERN. From "The Pakenham," Raphael Street, with its little old-fashioned, squalid houses, curves like a scimitar towards Trevor Square. Half-way up its left side are Middleton's Dining-Rooms, in whose windows placards are pasted bearing the word TO-DAY printed in large capitals, and, written in blue chalk below, such inducements as *Rabbit Pie*, *Boiled Leg of Pork*, *Beef Steak Pudding*. As the street nears Trevor Square it narrows suddenly, and a small passage called Lancelot Place runs off to the left, down which one has a glimpse of a little one-storeyed cottage with palings, and above them the unexpected green splash of a tree, the remains, it seems, of one of the many villages which London has enclosed and overwhelmed. Christopher had been enchanted by all these things, and by the clean little dairy and provisions shop which stands at the point where Raphael Street narrows to a passage, a shop which belongs certainly to some Jane Austen village. He had been enchanted, too, by Trevor Square itself, which at that time had hardly begun to show the signs, nowadays evident, of a gradual emergence from its former dinginess. The rusty privets which edged the surrounding path of the long garden in the centre of the square were freckled with young leaves, bright as little green flames among the dull blackness of the old ones, and the tall poplars that rose at intervals above the railings were thickly flaked with

light-hung greenery, for it was then early springtime. At one point the iron railings had sprouted into a tall, old-fashioned lamp-bracket.

But Christopher had long ceased to take pleasure in these things, and to-day he did not even see them, for all his attention was withdrawn inwards. He was not thinking : he was wholly absorbed by the agitation of his mind. He had so far lost consciousness of his surroundings that when he came to himself at the bottom of Raphael Street he could not understand how he had arrived there. He felt as weak and exhausted as if he had just risen from a long illness. To cross the wide street swarming with traffic, in order to reach the top of Sloane Street, seemed to him a labour beyond his powers. He paused near the entrance to Tattersall's, and at that moment he caught sight of a clock. Something in its appearance struck him at once. What was wrong with it? He realised next moment that what was wrong with it was that its hands were at ten minutes to nine instead of at twenty past, as they had been when they caught his eye every week-day morning for the past seven years. The clock must have stopped. He pulled out his watch. It was at ten to nine, and then he recollected how he had left home without thinking of the time, with no other thought, in fact, than to get out of the house. He was not due at the office for nearly an hour ; and, growing aware, for the first time since he had left home, of the beauty of the day, he decided that he would walk through the Park and catch a bus at Hyde Park Corner. The quiet and beauty of the Park would soothe him : it would be fairly empty at this hour, and he would find there at

least a little of the solitude and loveliness of the country for which he had so much longed as he lay thinking in bed this morning.

And so he turned his back on Sloane Street and entered the passage which skirts "The Pakenham" and runs between high blocks of flats into Kensington Road. Crossing Kensington Road, he took that other passage, immediately opposite, which leads into the Park through an iron gateway. The bland greenness of trees and lawns lay spread before him, and with a little thrill of delight he saw through the vertical bands of dark tree-trunks the softly glittering water of the Serpentine. The scene had still upon it the bloom of early morning. At the end of a path that diverged obliquely to the right and cut across the Row he saw, pure and immaterial in the morning light, the white stone bridge which stands at the Serpentine's eastern boundary. He chose that path, and when he had reached the bridge he leant upon the parapet and looked westwards. But he saw nothing of the calm scene that lay before him, for his attention was once more drawn inwards and the outer world was extinguished.

The agitation of his mind had by now almost abated, but it had left him sick at heart. He felt internally scalded, as though he had swallowed some bitter, burning liquid. That they should have come at last to open quarrelling horrified him. He had half-persuaded himself, during those long ruminations before dawn, that forbearance was useless and that his proper course, when she attacked him, was to attack back. Yet when he had accidentally done so, how much more horrible their hostility had become.

How loathsome it was to think of himself and Rosamund seated there at the breakfast-table, each violently and injuriously accusing the other of selfishness and both by implication holding themselves up as paragons of generosity. It only proved how little real generosity there was between them. Rosamund's face, white and drawn and gazing at him with hatred, was indelibly fixed on his memory, so indelibly that he could not visualise its normal expression. When he tried to do so, that white look of hate rose before him with terrible vividness. But it did not rouse a reciprocal hatred in him : on the contrary, it stirred him to a sharp remorse, for he felt that it was he who had been the aggressor, that by his sudden violence he had tortured her into hatred as a harmless animal can be tortured. He at least, he told himself reproachfully, had no right to abandon his self-control.

So Christopher accused himself, and their quarrel seemed to him the more tragic because it had arisen out of his desperate attempt at a reconciliation. How was it that his friendly intention had so suddenly been twisted and perverted into an embittered hostility ? His mind returned to their quarrel, trying to recall the point at which they had gone so hopelessly wrong, but the violence of his agitation had obscured the memory of the details, and, as he confusedly rummaged among the fierce broken sentences that strewed his mind like splinters of searing metal, he felt suddenly exhausted and sickened and gave up the attempt. What, after all, did it matter? The fact—the disastrous fact—was that they had fallen at last to that depth of sordid

brutality. He longed to return home, seek out Rosamund, take her in his arms, and soothe away her trouble. He would pour out to her his remorse and self-reproach and implore her to forgive him ; and he imagined her face gradually clearing, he saw her smile as once, in that remote, happy time, she had smiled at him, and then they forgot their long, weary antagonism in a rapturous embrace. He sighed deeply. Such thoughts, he knew too well, were pure fantasy, for if he were to go home now Rosamund would not accept his protestations. She would not forgive him because, for some dark reason, she was resolved never to forgive him. She would cherish against him unremittingly not only the sins which he had committed, but also, and more especially, all those uncommitted sins which she had invented for him. He was helpless, caught, as in all his relations with her, in a cleft stick.

Brooding there upon the Serpentine bridge, he realised for the first time that he both loved and hated her. For he certainly loved her still. He had only to picture her white, drawn face of this morning and feel the unendurable pang of remorse which it roused in him, to realise how profoundly and hopelessly he still loved her. But he hated her too, with that hatred which is the poison to which love turns when it is denied expression. He remembered that poem of Catullus's which had always seemed so obscure to him as a boy. Its meaning was very clear to him now : " I love and I hate. You ask, perchance, how this can be. I know not : but I feel it happen and the pain of it is excruciating."

How terribly true the poem was. How, Christopher wondered hopelessly, was he ever to escape from that torturing dilemma? If he were infinitely stronger and more generous than he was, he would be able to transcend the hatred and win Rosamund by the sheer purity of his love. But such a love, he knew, was beyond his reach. As it was, only Rosamund herself could release him, and that only by falling in love with him. Alas, that was as impossible as the other. And so he was doomed to rot in this corroding ferment of love and hate, for the more he loved her, the more he must inevitably hate. Unless—— But that, too, was impossible. Yet, if only he could achieve it, that would release him most effectually. If only he could abandon both love and hate and liberate himself from Rosamund altogether. He smiled grimly. That was one of those clean, strenuous acts of which he knew only too well he was incapable. It belonged to that noble madness of which he had dreamed in bed that morning when he had longed so intensely to break away from the stale, flaccid, conventional life of the respectable business man. It was not only that he lacked the courage and energy. His heart, too, forbade it. If it pained him so horribly to attack Rosamund as he had done that morning, how could he ever bring himself to fling in her face the cruel insult of desertion? No, there was no help for it: he would have to resign himself, live on in a stagnation stirred only by the small, ignoble pleasures of the senses. The important thing was to avoid useless repining. The disappointed man is a melancholy object, but also rather a contemptible one; and Christopher was resolved to disguise from

the world as thoroughly as possible the lamentable failure of his life.

He roused himself now from his brooding and looked out across the bright water spreading from under his feet to the blue-grey screen of trees which closed its farther reach from view. Little flotillas of water-fowl floated idly above their blurred reflections on the iris-blue surface, and suddenly, twenty yards in front of him, two ducks shot in level flight across the water, their flashing shapes keen and sharply angular as if cut out of sheet metal. He followed their flight till one after another they dropped to the water, fraying it, with the speed at which they struck it, to backward-flying, silvery flames. The sight of them recalled him still further from the inner world of his miseries to the world outside, and for a moment he saw that world once again, as in his youth, not as a place from which all beauty and adventure had departed, but as an unexplored paradise in which exquisite surprises, such as that sudden apparition of the flying ducks, might overtake him at any moment.

That was how the world had appeared to him in his youth, not only the natural world, but also the world of the mind. In those days he had never doubted that before the end of his life he would explore both those worlds to their utmost limits. They lay before him, waiting for him, and he, for his part, was burning to set out. The thought of ways and means did not trouble him in those eager days. He was determined that he would ransack Europe ; not the northern parts, which did not attract him, but France, Italy, Greece, and Spain—especially

Spain, the beautiful, fierce, romantic land which the Arabs had ruled for seven hundred years. After that he would visit remoter lands—Egypt, Persia, Arabia, the lands of parching deserts and fairylike oases ; Cairo, and Bagdad, where he had supposed that life was still as it was in the days of the Thousand and One Nights ; and China, more lovely and mysterious even than these. He would learn their languages, of course, so that he would not merely pass through them as a stranger, but would live in them as a native, squatting for hours with crossed legs, in solemn conversation with sages, or riding on swift, bird-like camels, sleeping in the warm desert sand, and drawing his burnous across his face against the hissing sand-storms. It was not until recent years that he had fully realised the fact that he would never see Persia, or Arabia, or China ; that he would actually die and leave those mysterious places unvisited. It was even now almost impossible to believe that. In the depths of his mind lurked the unconfessed and almost unrealised question : " Why then, do these places exist ? Or do they actually exist ? Does any place exist until I visit it and confer reality upon it ? "

It was hard to forgo those adventures, to cut down his boundless ambitions to fit the niggardly demands of time and space and the puny scope of human capacity. He began, now, to murmur to himself over and over again : " You'll never see Persia ! You'll never see China ! " trying, trying, like a stupid schoolboy, to understand the plain truth of those facts ; and, when at last for a moment he succeeded in realising it, his heart sank like a stone

and it seemed to him that an irreparable loss had befallen him. Gradually, with advancing years, he supposed, a man's high ambitions fall away from him, until he is left with nothing—nothing, or almost nothing, achieved, and nothing any longer desired. What a hideous and tragic declension from the noble hungers of youth.

And it was the same with the things of the mind. He had never doubted in his early days that he would eventually absorb all knowledge ; not only the ecstatic wisdom which lurks behind poetry and music and painting and is the innermost core of religion, but the calmer and more practical knowledge of philosophy, psychology, and the sciences. In all these, he knew, lurked those thrilling glimpses of the inexpressible secret which he had set out to capture, years before, on those rocking-horse journeys, in the spectacle of the wintry play called "Boadicea," and in the mystic ceremony of the lantern in the tree ; and he believed that, when he had finally absorbed the whole mass of human knowledge, the secret would burst upon him in a sudden illuminating holocaust. Even as lately as his Cambridge days he had still believed that he would read everything there was to be read before he died. That was why he had never, except as examinations compelled, concentrated on any particular subject or period, as some of his friends had done. Alec Winter, for instance, had devoted all his spare time to the Elizabethans. To Christopher, with all life and all knowledge before him, it had seemed absurd to begin specialising so early, and he had dabbled in a disorderly way in any subject and any period that

took his wayward fancy. His idea was to take a preliminary survey of the ground : later he would begin more serious explorations, and then this random knowledge which he had been light-heartedly accumulating would fall into its appointed place in the growing plan. He did not know that his mind was all the while systematically selecting the food it desired.

And this method had persisted, for in the end he had never become an orderly reader. He had tried, it is true, after one or two years of this indiscriminate dabbling, to take up definite subjects. He took up philosophy with great enthusiasm, but he never succeeded in thoroughly reading any philosopher. His failure to do so was not due to laziness so much as to the discovery which he inevitably made before very long, that no philosopher could give him what he sought. He had dabbled in Plato, Locke, Berkeley, Kant, Spenser, Nietzsche, Bergson, Croce, and many others, filled notebooks with information about them and synopses of their systems, and then dropped them one by one, disillusioned at finding that none of them held the inexpressible secret. Nietzsche had given him more than all the rest except Plato, because he was more of a poet and less of a mathematician. But nowadays Christopher never read any of them, for he had come to believe that philosophy was nothing more than a kind of decorative handicraft, a woven fabric of ideas whose patterns were often fascinating but which was of no practical use. It was, in fact, a kind of unsuccessful poetry, unsuccessful because it was not pure, because it achieved the poetic only by accident, and was too heavily alloyed with verbal mathematics.

Pure literature, whether poetry or prose, gave him more satisfaction. How well he remembered his discovery of Swinburne. He had come upon the opening lines of the " Hendecasyllabics," quoted in some critical article :

> In the month of the long decline of roses
> I, beholding the summer dead before me,
> Set my face to sea and journeyed silent,
> Gazing eagerly where above the sea-mark
> Flame as fierce as the fervid eyes of lions
> Half divided the eyelids of the sunset. . . .

Those lines had contained for him a magic which he had found nowhere else : rhythm and sound and imagery were so perfectly blended that the poem, it had seemed to him, transcended intellectual meaning and reached to the imagination by another channel. He was an undergraduate then, and he had rushed off to Macmillan and Bowes and ordered the complete Swinburne which had appeared a few years before, determined to devour everything he had written. But Swinburne, like the philosophers, had deceived him, and his enthusiasm had grown cold long before he was half-way through the works, though a few of the early poems still retained their wonder.

His reaction against the beautiful verbalism of Swinburne had driven him to Meredith, and at first Meredith had seemed to provide what both Swinburne and the philosophers had failed to give, for Christopher found in him both the philosophy of poetry and the poetry of philosophy. But though Meredith gave him much, he did not satisfy him for

long. Too often the philosopher in him silenced the poet, and the philosopher himself limited the imagination too narrowly. It seemed that neither the purely sensuous, as in much of Swinburne, nor the purely intellectual, as in much of Meredith, could permanently nourish the imagination. The true food of the imagination, it had seemed to Christopher, was to be found in those mysterious utterances that contain a kind of sublime intellectuality which speaks direct to the soul and cannot be analysed by the mind into logical statements.

> Wisdom and Spirit of the universe!
> Thou Soul that art the Eternity of thought!
> And giv'st to forms and images a breath
> And everlasting motion!

Christopher, gazing out again over the blue water of the Serpentine, revolved those lines of Wordsworth in his mind with a sense of utter satisfaction. They seemed charged with imagination and with thought; yet who could explain in other words what the thought signified? That surely was the nature of great art, that what it expressed could not be otherwise expressed. Other phrases rose to his memory:

> Not mine own fears, nor the prophetic soul
> Of the wide world dreaming on things to come . . .

and the wonderful phrase from *Lear*:

> And take upon's the mystery of things
> As if we were God's spies . . .

There Shakespeare achieved the same sublime

intellectuality, the perfect blend of thought and imagination.

That problem of poetry, thought Christopher, as he turned from the parapet of the bridge and continued on his way, was something of the same nature as the problem of action and thought in life upon which he had reflected in bed that morning—the problem of whether it is right to express impulse immediately in action or to submit it to the taming and refining process of thought. Who could tell? Was it not better to abandon these insoluble problems, to turn one's eyes outwards from the dark and ghostly dungeons of the mind to the clear realities of the material world, and to let each occasion as it arose find its own solution in a rough-and-ready compromise between rashness and over-thoughtfulness? For all thought other than clear and practical thought was a disease of the mind.

Christopher let his eyes wander over the grass and among the shrubs and trees. How marvellously green they were this morning, an infinitely varied green, mixed from light and shadow and the assembled species of trees and plants. The greenness caressed and soothed his heart, and it seemed to him at that moment that there could be no trouble of the mind that nature would not eventually soothe away. He turned sharply to the right. He was now on a path that runs southwards towards the Row and joins it not far from where it ends at Hyde Park Corner. How he longed to spend the whole summer day sitting and prowling in the Park. The thought of the office appalled him. He took out his watch. There was still a quarter of an hour before he need take a bus, and

so he sat down on one of the little green chairs that bordered the path. A quarter of an hour of freedom —more, for the bus ride would be freedom too.

He stretched out his legs before him, and, taking off his bowler hat, laid it on the next chair. For a while he stared at it, and then his gaze transferred itself to his legs, clad in correct grey-striped trousers. How incredible it was that he had walked the world for seven years in clothes so utterly foreign to him. They were the badge of the servitude he had so gladly undertaken in order to win Rosamund. In the days before the war he had worn rough tweeds or grey flannel, soft cuffs and collars and weather-stained hats, clothes which seemed to be not a disguise, but a part of himself, a young man with two hundred and fifty a year and literary ambitions. His father had died when he was seventeen, and his mother, who had a fond belief in his literary ability, did not trouble him about settling down and entering a profession as his father would certainly have done. And so he had lived a free, frugal, and to outward appearances an aimless life, wasting his time, as his aunts and uncles asserted, until the war came. And after the war, nearly a year after he had been demobilised, he had met Rosamund and fallen head over heels in love with her. But an income of two hundred and fifty a year was obviously not nearly enough to marry on, and when an old friend of his father offered to take him into his office, with the prospect of eventually becoming a partner, Christopher had decided to accept the offer, and his uncles and aunts asserted that the war had been the making of him.

Christopher had known perfectly well what he was doing. The fact that he had now a definite and most desirable object in earning money made the prospect of submitting himself for the better part of each day to work which might be uncongenial easily endurable to him. It would be well worth while if the reward was to be Rosamund—Rosamund to live with and work for. And so he had deliberately and very successfully turned himself into a business man.

It had amused him, in the exuberance of his new happiness, to buy a bowler, a black coat and grey trousers, white starched collars and sober ties, and he wore them light-heartedly, as a man wears fancy-dress. It took him a year to get over the joke of Christopher Brade in a bowler, and the fact that his new style of dress suited him remarkably well was an additional delight, for Christopher, though not excessively vain, took a certain pleasure in his good looks. But when, hardly more than a year after his marriage, Rosamund had turned against him and he had found himself suddenly cheated of his reward, the office at once became for him an unrelieved drudgery and his conventional dress the uniform of his slavery. He glanced back from his trousers to the bowler on the seat beside him. Could anything be more triumphantly hideous? And, besides its hideousness, it stood for everything that was dull and formal in life. The man who wore a bowler confessed himself the slave of the Octopus. Who would think of setting out to discover new life in a bowler? The fact that Christopher himself now wore one every day meant, he told himself, that his days of adventure

were over and all his high hopes of exploring the world would remain for ever unfulfilled. Nothing that was not commonplace would ever happen to him again. As for exploring the world, he would not even explore Europe. Never again would he make an expedition such as he had made with Alec Winter when, in their early twenties, they had spent a wonderful month in Italy.

For ten days they had stayed in Florence. At first Christopher had been disappointed. They had arrived on a grey evening : streets, squares, houses, and the river had appeared a uniform mud-colour. Dust blew about, and the town seemed full of trams that pushed their way down narrow streets and round sharp corners with the excruciating screech of polished wheels grinding on polished rails. But next morning they had awoken to hot sunshine and a blue sky, and the place was transformed. The huddled houses of the Lung' Arno—from among which rose here and there an old square tower, a modest campanile, or the great bubble of a dome—hung like a low cliff whose face varied from yellows to browns and from browns to soft reds, above the jade-green of the river ; and here and there the cliffs jutted out into the stream to form a bridge of almost unbelievable beauty. On either side of the Arno, suburbs climbed the abrupt hills, house piled on house and terrace on terrace, as though the hills themselves were built of blocks of brown stone, soberly embellished with the slim, black monuments of cypresses ; and out of the distance rose hills of such a pure and diaphanous violet that they seemed to be magic solidifications of light. Towards sunset,

as Christopher and Alec walked the Lung' Arno, it seemed that the very stones of the houses and bridges, soaked all day in sunlight, became transparent from saturation, so that it was impossible to discover the dividing line between the solid walls and their shimmering reflections which struck downwards into the gleaming river.

Day by day, as the two young men ransacked palaces and churches and galleries, the inner beauty and historic significance of Florence assumed in their minds a deeper and deeper reality which enriched its outward loveliness. But the memory that remained with Christopher, as a thing more enchanting than even the memory of Florence, was that of the little town of San Gimignano ; and, sitting now in Hyde Park staring before him, Christopher saw, not shaven lawns and tall trees, nor the rose and blue and yellow of the flower-beds, but towers like gaunt monoliths shooting up to the sky out of the tall, narrow streets and irregular squares—towers which were half-golden and half-grey in morning sunlight, half-rosy and half-violet at sunset, which loomed black and purple among the stars at night above the yellow lamplight that splashed their bases. The town seemed to have been carved out of the solid rock of its hilltop, for the towers were of stone, the houses of stone, and the streets and squares paved with blocks of stone. It was barbaric and incredibly old ; yet under the barbaric crust bloomed the exquisite Tuscan culture, narrower and more provincial than in Florence, but as rich in colour. To visit the small cathedral, so severely plain outside, so rich inside with crowded and glowing frescoes, was to break open a pomegranate

and discover the crimson pulp under the hard, stone-coloured husk.

Christopher recalled their first sight of the town. They had taken the train from Florence to Certaldo, and had then set out to walk the seven miles to San Gimignano. How clearly he remembered their delighted shock when, having covered about half the distance, they rounded the curve of a hillside and came full upon the distant city set majestically like a crown, with its walls, its gates, and its thirteen huge towers, on the smooth, grey mound of its olive-clad hill. At that very moment, as if the sight alone were not enough, all the bells in the town had begun booming and jangling together, a blare of beaten bronze, as if the harsh sunlight had become suddenly audible. The bells were ringing for noon. Every day at noon the town brimmed up with that humming of bells.

At that moment Christopher knew that reality had matched his dreams. They walked on, between olive-groves and vineyards in which the peasants were gathering the grapes, for it was vintage-time, and soon they climbed the steep slope that led to the high city-gate. The narrow tunnel of the street between the gauntly towering houses was deliciously cool and dim after the heat and glare of the road.

The place had bewitched them, so that, instead of spending a night there, as they had intended, they had stayed on until it was time for them to return to England, convinced that nowhere else would they find anything so wholly satisfying to their young imaginations. It had been wonderful to Christopher to be thus assured that his boyish

longings to explore the world had not been a crying for the moon, but that the world was as beautiful and as moving as he had believed.

How he longed now, as he glanced with disgust at his bowler hat, to return to San Gimignano. A fortnight there, he felt, would give him back all the wonder and desire, all the warm, youthful zeal which had faded out of his life. He took up his hat, put it on, and rose to his feet ; and as he did so Rosamund's face, white and drawn and twisted with hatred, swam up before his mind's eye, and a desolating misery overwhelmed him.

CHAPTER V

Rosamund, standing with her elbow on the dining-room mantelpiece, did not move when she saw Christopher pass the window. On the contrary, she quite deliberately remained in the same attitude as before, as if to prove to herself that Christopher's flight meant nothing to her. But, although she would not admit it to herself, she had been alarmed, and her mind, at the sight of Christopher's unexpected departure, had paused in the infuriated dance to which their quarrel had roused it to ask apprehensively what exactly had happened. That Christopher, always so quiet and self-contained, should break out as he had done during breakfast, and then rush from the house half an hour before his usual time, meant that the state of affairs was serious. What if, just to punish her, he should stay away all night?

Punish her? The evil Rosamund rose in indignation. What did he imagine he had to punish her for? It was he who deserved punishing. But, all the same, what if he *should* stay away all night, or even for several nights? With sudden alarm she remembered their dinner-party. He might stay away from that, just to spite her. How very awkward that would be. How would she be able to disguise from the guests the fact that something rather irregular had

occurred? The prospect of any kind of scandal or gossip horrified her. Perhaps it would be safer to telegraph to them all saying that the party was unavoidably postponed. But what if, after all, Christopher returned as usual? She would have to explain to him what she had done, and that would give away the fact of her alarm, and would also suggest to him the idea of retaliating in future by going away. Besides, if the party were put off it would be a score for him. No, the party must not be put off.

But next moment she felt a sudden misgiving which she instantly dismissed with a tightening of her lips. For she knew, though she never admitted it to herself, that she was not naturally a good hostess and that she relied much on Christopher, who, on social occasions, played into her hands so subtly that, at the end of a party, she was always able to assure herself that she had managed it to perfection. At the realisation that his support might not be forthcoming to-night, her self-assurance flagged for a moment. Would she ever be able to make a success of it if Christopher were not there? But her pride reassured her, and as her mind began to construct a puppet-show forecast of the party, she heard herself greeting the arriving guests with glib phrases:

"Poor Christopher! He had to start, you see, almost at a moment's notice. His uncle, his father's youngest brother" (a little circumstantial detail like that always made a statement so much more convincing), "was suddenly seized with appendicitis yesterday."

But would that be enough, an uncle with appendicitis? "He lives alone, you see, and we're rather afraid, from the wire this morning, that he hasn't stood the operation very well." No, it would not, after all, be very difficult to explain away Christopher's absence this evening. But suppose he were to stay away for several days? It would become impossible, then, to hush it up.

But why was she imagining all this? Christopher was not the man to do mad things like that. The very fact that he was so self-contained proved that he would do nothing foolish now. But the uncertainty, the harassing uncertainty, that would torment her all day until five o'clock, the hour at which he always returned from the office! Again her mind began its infuriated dance. The brute, the swine, to treat her like this! But, after all, men *were* swine, all of them. Even Norman! Yes, Norman had been the biggest swine of the lot.

Norman, Norman! His very name still wrung her heart, although it was six years since she had seen him. She would never escape from Norman. He had wrecked her life. Ah, there was that phrase again! Standing there alone in the dining-room, Rosamund blushed scarlet at the thought of it, and then her anger boiled up against him as she recalled how at their last furious meeting she had turned upon him and said: "Well, you'll be able to tell yourself that you've wrecked my life, if that's any satisfaction to you"; and how Norman had replied: "Rosamund, you've been reading cheap novels. Let us try to talk sense."

Oh, the shame, the humiliation that had

overwhelmed her at that moment, for she had herself caught the faint overtone of the theatrical in her own phrase. But next moment her wounded self-respect had found refuge in anger. "You make idiotic remarks like that," she had replied, with quivering lip, "because you have no real feeling. You're stupid and unimaginative, like all men, and, having no feelings yourself, you leave mine out of account. To a man who is incapable of feeling, everything sounds like a cheap novel."

Norman's reply to that had seemed to her the meaningless repartee of an angry man. "And *you* can tell yourself, Rosamund," he had said, "that whatever wrecking there has been, has been done by you." By *her* ! What on earth did he mean by that ? Nothing, obviously.

When Christopher had fallen in love with her and she had allowed him at last to persuade her to marry him, she had felt both that she had taken a fine revenge on Norman and that she had escaped from him. How light-hearted and happy she had been. It was not that she loved Christopher. No, that she would never admit. But she had liked him immensely, and it was great fun to have him so absurdly in love with her. Life at once became full of all sorts of delightful novelties. But, of course, she had not really been happy : she had discovered that afterwards. She had merely been deceiving herself. It did not occur to her that she must, in that case, have been deceiving Christopher too. On the contrary, her belief was that it was Christopher's unscrupulous persistence that had deceived her into deceiving herself, into forgetting for a while that her life was

wrecked, into imagining that she could escape from Norman. Conceited fool that he was, to imagine that *he*, a creature like *him*, could make her forget Norman! And now, after tricking her and forcing himself upon her as he had done, he had turned on her and accused her, his unhappy victim, of all sorts of incredible things. All the little stabs of truth in what he had said had roused her to a frenzy of self-defence. Not for a moment would she have admitted that they had pricked her conscience. They only proved what she had said from the beginning, that he was incapable of understanding, that he had no imagination. It did not occur to her to define to herself what it was that she claimed of Christopher that he so infallibly failed to give. Her heart cried out inarticulately for some divine redress for the pain that life had inflicted on her.

For she had once trusted that life was good, and life had deceived her cruelly. It had deceived her first when, as a little child, she had given herself to her mother: for when Maurice, her brother, was born her mother had turned from her to the new baby and Rosamund had felt herself suddenly and heart-rendingly alone. Never again had she had her mother all to herself. Maurice had usurped her place: all the devotion which her mother had previously lavished upon her had been suddenly snatched from her and given to Maurice. She had forgotten that childish tragedy, but her mind had not forgotten, and her mind told her that life was evil, that if ever she gave herself she would be cruelly cheated, that the only safe thing was to claim everything and give nothing.

Then she had fallen in love, and for a while life became good again. She was so infatuated by Norman that she forgot her previous misgivings and gave her heart to him without a thought. And how marvellous it had been. Everything in the world had suddenly gone right, for Norman loved her as deeply as she loved him. At the mere thought of him, even now, she felt as if her body and soul were melting away, yielding defencelessly like ice before sunshine. She felt with an actuality almost physical the clasp of his strong brown hands and the rough touch of his brown cheek, whose shaven golden stubble pricked hers. She had always thought of him as brown; large and gentle and brown-haired, brown-eyed, and brown-skinned. Even his clothes were brown and rough like himself. At that sharp memory of him despair came over her, and she remembered how he, too, had cheated her of what her scarred heart cried out for. She hated him, even while her body and soul desired him.

Her first disillusionment had been that day when he had received a telegram from his mother, saying that she was coming to town next day and asking to come to tea with him. He had already asked Rosamund to have tea with him, but Rosamund did not like his mother, and she fully expected that Norman would wire back and put his mother off. What he had actually done was to put Rosamund off. He had asked her if she would have dinner with him instead. "Oh, certainly, if you really prefer it," she had replied, showing by her tone how deeply she was hurt. Norman had pleaded that his mother hardly ever came to town and would be horribly

disappointed not to see him. "My dear Norman," she had answered, "I don't deny for a moment that it's perfectly reasonable. If you feel you *ought* to put off our tea, I haven't a word to say."

Her lip trembled as she spoke. Norman put a hand on her shoulder. "Surely, darling," he had said, "you don't imagine that because I consider my mother's feelings—— ?"

But Rosamund was determined not to be cajoled. She had meant what she said when she had said that his request was perfectly reasonable. It was precisely its reasonableness that pained her, for the old wound in her heart demanded for its cure the complete surrender of her lover. It was just such a moment as this which, for her, was the test of Norman's love ; and now that the test had come, he had failed. The true lover would instantly and unhesitatingly have rejected his mother for her sake. She was bitterly disappointed and wounded, and had interrupted him in the middle of his protestation. "Say no more about it, Norman," she had replied. "I entirely understand."

Yes, she had understood indeed, only too well, and her eyes had suddenly filled with tears and she had rushed from the room, leaving Norman alone. That surely ought to have been a warning to her, but Norman had such a hold on her that in a week she had forgotten all about it and everything was blissful once again.

That was what men did. They hypnotised you until you were helplessly in their power and then they did what they liked with you. For before long Norman's selfishness had shown itself again.

Yes, that was what had wrecked her life—his utter selfishness. It had been this always that had caused their quarrels. He was incapable of abandoning himself to her as she abandoned herself to him, and when she reproached him he retorted that it was she, on the contrary, who was selfish—she who had given herself so utterly into his hands that nothing of her was left.

It had been the incident of Miss Hetty, the shorthand typist, that had finally disillusioned her. Miss Hetty—absurd, simpering little creature—used to go to Norman's flat one afternoon a week to take down and type his weekly article for the *Commentator* and any book reviews that he was ready to dictate. Rosamund had often wondered about Miss Hetty, but, knowing that Wednesday was a busy afternoon, she had always kept away from Norman's flat.

Once, however, having a question about theatre tickets which she must ask him at once, she had called and found Norman and Miss Hetty sitting over the fire having tea. It was precisely as if, for the day, Miss Hetty had taken Rosamund's place ; and she had noticed that when Norman opened the door to her he had looked distinctly embarrassed. She had asked her question and hurried away immediately, refusing the offer of a cup of tea, and the thing had rankled in her mind for days. It worried her absurdly, leaping up at unexpected moments and stabbing her with a little pang of fear. At last she resolved to discover the truth, but when she thought of asking Norman about it she discovered that she could not bring herself to speak of it.

It had assumed such a significance in her mind that she could not trust herself to mention it without betraying agitation. But one day when, in reply to some suggestion of hers, Norman told her that he was engaged for the evening, it slipped from her tongue in a sudden flash of anger, almost before she realised what she was saying. " I suppose you're having dinner with that absurd little Miss What's-her-Name."

Norman had glanced at her in amused astonishment. " Miss What's-her-Name ? " he said. " I'm afraid I haven't the pleasure."

" You know quite well whom I mean," said Rosamund ; " that silly little typist."

" Miss Hetty ! " replied Norman. " Good God ! So you've started ideas about poor Miss Hetty, have you, Rosamund ? "

" No," said Rosamund coldly ; " but there would have been less danger of my starting ideas, as you call it, if you had been honest about her."

Norman had assumed his weary, stubborn air. " I'm afraid I don't follow," he said.

" I mean," said Rosamund (she had regained her self-control and spoke in a cold, matter-of-fact voice as if discussing some abstract question)—" I mean, if you had not so carefully pretended to me all this time that Wednesdays were such busy afternoons."

" But they *are* busy afternoons," said Norman.

Rosamund laughed. " You weren't particularly busy when I called last week," she said.

" Damn it, you're not going to deny us a cup of tea, are you, Rosamund ? " he expostulated. " We're at it often till half-past six or seven."

Rosamund considered the matter. "I don't see," she said, "why she shouldn't have her tea, if she *must* have it, outside."

"While I have mine here and then wait half an hour for her to come back? No, thank you!"

"It would waste far less time, I should have thought, than sitting here chattering over the fire."

"My dear Rosamund, you'll be jealous of Mrs. Bond next and forbid me to have her here to wash up and make my bed."

"Well, at least you don't call Mrs. Bond by pet names, presumably."

"And do I call Miss Hetty by pet names?"

Rosamund flushed. "This childlike innocence won't work on me, Norman. You know perfectly well what I mean. Why can't you call her by her surname instead of all this nonsense about Miss *Hetty*?"

"But, my dear child, Hetty is her surname. Her father's called Hetty, her uncles and great-uncles, her grandfather and great-grandfather are all called Hetty. Good God!" Norman threw back his head and burst out laughing, while Rosamund, ashamed at her mistake, turned scarlet.

"Well, whatever the truth is," she said, her eyes blazing, "you must get rid of her, unless, that is, you prefer to quarrel with me."

"Get rid of Miss Hetty? But, my dear Rosamund, Miss Hetty's invaluable. She's up to all my peculiarities and all my own particular prejudices about punctuation."

But Rosamund's temper was up. "As you like," she said in a hard, cold voice. "It rests with you."

"But seriously, Rosamund," asked Norman—"do you seriously mean to tell me that you suspect——"

"I suspect nothing," answered Rosamund shortly; "I merely ask you as a favour to get rid of Miss Hetty."

"So you are determined, just for an idle whim, to put me to a great deal of inconvenience and to do a perfectly harmless woman out of her job? Remember that the loss of even one afternoon's work a week means a good deal to a woman like Miss Hetty, who has to earn a living."

Rosamund raised her eyebrows. "I'm afraid I can't go into all that, Norman. You're merely trying to avoid the issue, which is this: Will you or will you not get rid of Miss Hetty?"

Norman looked her straight in the eye. "No," he said, "I will not."

"I thought as much," said Rosamund, with quiet ferocity, though inwardly she was trembling. "I was right, after all."

"If you really believe you were right," replied Norman, with anger in his voice, "you're a fool, and if you don't, you're selfish and dishonest. Neither alternative is very agreeable." Then his voice softened, though he still spoke sternly. "It's time you began to realise, Rosamund, that the man or woman who submits to all your whims, however unjust, is not showing you a very deep or a very flattering form of affection. You tried to force me, some weeks ago, to behave unkindly to my mother, and now you are trying to force me to treat a perfectly innocent woman, whom I like, with gross

injustice. Do you mean to tell me you would really be better pleased if I did so ? "

" Yes," said Rosamund, " I do ; and if you had any imagination you would understand why. But you're just stupid and priggish. You can preach beautiful sermons, Norman, but you have simply no idea, I'm afraid, what it means to be in love."

" Very well," said Norman calmly, " we'll leave it at that."

He turned and went, with evident determination, towards the door. His hand grasped the door-knob, and it seemed to Rosamund that at the same moment a cold hand grasped her heart. She flung herself into a chair and burst into tears.

Norman came slowly back and stood over her. " You're a brute," she sobbed. " You're a brute and I hate you."

" In that case," said Norman, with the same insufferable calmness, " there's nothing more to be said."

Though her face was still buried in her hands she knew that he had turned from her, and then she heard him going again towards the door. She sat up and gazed at him white-faced, and it was then that she had come out with her memorable phrase : " Well, you'll be able to tell yourself that you've wrecked my life, if that's any satisfaction to you " ; and Norman had replied . . . But now she drove the memory of his words from her mind, grinding her teeth with rage ; and at the sound of it she came to herself, standing, still with her elbow on the dining-room mantelpiece and her foot on the fender.

She moved her foot from the fender, turned square

to the mantelpiece, and, setting the other elbow also on it, supported her face in both hands and gazed mournfully at herself in the mirror. Her eyes inspected with interest the eyes that gazed at her out of the glass. They were tired eyes. She noticed with a little stab of apprehension that the lower lids were puffed and wrinkled. She studied the face more intently. The flesh was beginning to sink at the outer edges of the eye-sockets where cheek joins temple. Then, with the fingers of each hand laid flat on her temples, she pressed the skin back from her face, and suddenly all the hollows and wrinkles vanished. Rosamund stared at herself in happy amazement : she had become ten years younger. Then she reversed the process, pressing the skin of cheeks and temples inwards towards her eyes and mouth. Now her face had become fleshy and lowering and sensual. She inspected it, half horrified, half delighted. She recognised herself in the face, but it was as if the passionate animal in her had taken possession and driven out all else. A wicked face, yet beautiful too. Suddenly the thought of Norman rushed back, and, taking down her arms, she turned with a deep sigh from the mirror and went out of the room.

CHAPTER VI

Leaving the group of green folding chairs, Christopher made his way down the path towards Hyde Park Corner. Soon the path lost itself in the broader path that borders the Row under the towering canopies of huge elms. Half-seen beyond the brown earth of the Row and the receding pillars of the elm-trunks, the golden yellow of Apsley House and the white and black of the park gates closed the view with broken glimpses of window and pillar and cornice.

Christopher crossed the Row and cut down the little path that leads out of the Park through an iron gate at the point, opposite Hyde Park Corner tube station, where the buses stop. He chose a bus with an open top and seated himself on the front seat. The trees of the Green Park streamed slowly past him, their young leaves palpitating in the light breeze, as if alive, over the mottled green of rolling lawns. Despite long habit, Christopher still took a childish delight in riding on a bus or train. It was a ceaseless pleasure to him to sit, effortlessly sliding through the air, while a changing stream of impressions flowed like cooling waters through his mind. Through the trees on his right, the Victoria Memorial, white and gold in the sunlight, the massed towers of the Houses of Parliament, and the sombre

pile of Queen Anne's Mansions wheeled on a slow circumference, and straight ahead of him the Ritz and the vast white block of masonry which had lately replaced Devonshire House drew further apart to receive the bus, while the crowded houses and shops of Piccadilly, with Burlington House conspicuous among them, grouped and regrouped themselves as they moved towards him.

All this moving phantasmagoria soothed his tormented mind. He was suspended in a comforting limbo : his home and Rosamund, with her hatred, were receding farther and farther behind him, while Lincoln's Inn Fields and the office were still hidden in the distance ahead. If only he could travel on like that all day, leaving the cruel past behind. " Out of sight, out of mind," said the proverb, and perhaps it might be possible, he thought, if a continuous stream of calm distractions were to flow on like this for ever, to forget the past and exist peacefully in a peacefully changing present.

" Live in the present." He had once, he recollected, endeavoured to make that his rule of life, for it had seemed to him, and it seemed so still, that half the troubles and complications of life spring from the fact that most men and women live either in the past or the future, so that their minds are out of tune with the present and they are incapable of inhabiting reality. That, surely, was what Christ meant when he said : " Take no thought for the morrow," and " Let the dead bury their dead." It was academic Christianity and not Christ Himself that had concentrated men's minds on a future life to which the present must be sacrificed. " Take care of the

present and the future will take care of itself," was the only sane rule of life.

But it was a rule that required definition, for it would be absurd, of course, to interpret it as a recommendation of improvidence in practical concerns. The rule, in fact, was intended to apply to the emotional life. People whose emotional life was transposed into the unalterable past or into the unpredictable future were incapable of disciplining and controlling and enjoying the present. They wept over the dead flowers of the past or dreamed of the visionary flowers of the future, and all the while their senses were shut against the living blossoms that were unfolding before their eyes. While our souls inhabit a physical body, we must live, if we are to live healthily, in the physical body of time, which is the present. " Pluck the flower of the present," said the ancients, and we accuse them of shallowness ; but it is we that are shallow in our shallow interpretation of their wisdom. The only sane life is the strenuous life : as soon as life becomes leisured and uneventful, the mind, starved of its proper food, breaks out into a disease of fantasies. But the strenuous life can be lived only in the present : if we live in the past or the future we condemn ourselves inevitably to a deadly quietism.

But what if the life of the present becomes unendurable ? Christopher's chest suddenly expanded with a deep breath. He breathed it out again, and that sudden and involuntary sigh recalled him to himself, and he awoke to find that he had just passed Burlington House. At either side of the three-arched entrance-gate, placards announced the Royal

Academy Exhibition. Yes, life had become almost unendurable to him nowadays, for his work, now that there was no sufficient object in it, had grown into an unbearable drudgery, and to return home from work was merely to move closer to the cause and centre of his unhappiness. Perhaps he might find refuge in reading, for reading, in the old days, had been his chief hobby. But Christopher knew that this was impossible now. His unhappiness was so deep-seated and his mind so disturbed that he would be unable, he knew, to achieve enough concentration for reading. What, then, must he do? He must lay hold of the present and mould it into a new and more desirable form. Well, he had tried to do so this morning in his attempt to persuade Rosamund to open her heart to him, and the attempt had been an utter failure; and now he was once more on his way to the office to drudge for the income necessary to perpetuate this life of misery.

What would happen if he were to throw up his profession? He would still have about £750 a year, for three years after his marriage his mother had died and he had come into a half-share of her money. He and Rosamund could live easily enough on that in a cottage in the country. But that would make matters worse still, for Rosamund did not care for the country, and, thrown together in a small house, they would drive one another mad.

As the bus passed St. James's, Piccadilly, Christopher began to dream that he lived in a small cottage in the country and kept a market-garden. He was married to a woman of the working-class. While he worked all day in the garden, digging,

sowing, thinning out, trenching, planting, and gathering, she kept house, and out of their mutual labour they built up a happy, healthy life together. He wondered if her lack of refinement and education would trouble him. Surely not. To a man of simple tastes, like himself, refinement of the heart was the only refinement that mattered. The rest was mere decoration. How horribly artificial was the life led by himself and Rosamund. He worked, physically inactive in a chair, not for their necessities, but for their superfluities, and Rosamund's contribution was no more than a bored supervision of the cook and the house-parlourmaid. Such a life could be made tolerable only by mutual love. But that other life of which he had been dreaming might be made happy with no more than a common friendship. With love it would be a paradise.

The bus swerved, before stopping near the entrance of the Piccadilly Hotel, to avoid a patch of roadway which had been railed off for repairs. Workmen, with their sleeves rolled up and shirts open at the throat, were taking up the road. One fellow with a superb chest was swinging a pick and levering away the closely fitted wood-blocks.

Christopher longed to send his bowler swimming like a quoit towards Piccadilly Circus, to fling away his coat and waistcoat, tear off tie and collar, and join them at work. Manual work ! How he longed for work to tax his muscles and give him that healthy physical weariness which eases the overcharged mind. It was unbearable to sit like a dummy all day, covered with tight clothes, and never stirring a muscle. He thought of the football and sports of his

school and college days, and he thought too of a wonderful experience, years ago, when Alec Winter and he had run down a long, grass-covered slope from a hilltop in Scotland. The slope was gentle enough to allow them to run at full speed, and whenever they came to a gorse-bush they took it in a flying leap. The sense of being an exquisitely efficient machine, limbs and muscles moving with a miraculous ease, returned to him with amazing reality. At such times a man becomes god and animal in one, and it seems to him that the whole living world, fired by the rosy glow of his body and the eager shine of his eyes, leaps into ecstatic flame about him.

But those days were long past for Christopher, nor did he delude himself with the belief that bodily labour alone would satisfy him. A life of labour with no one to labour for would, he knew, become tedious before long, even if it were not as tedious as his present life. With a sudden sinking of the heart at the sense of the hopelessness of his predicament, he realised that he could never be happy either in body or mind without love. Once it had seemed that to absorb the wisdom of the ages and to explore the wonders of the world would richly fill a lifetime. But soon the wonderful and profoundly disturbing element of love had crept into his life. Through the talk of his friends at school, through things read and half-understood in books and newspapers, he had learned, in the haphazard ways customary in those days, of the physical facts of love long before he himself had begun to be preoccupied with them. The fact that he was good at games, and enthralled

not only by them but also by books, delayed that awakening of his young mind to a later date than usual.

The first floors of the shops of Shaftesbury Avenue were flowing past him now on either hand, but Christopher did not notice them, for he was lying by a river with a volume of Chaucer in his hand, almost hidden by a dense growth of willow-herb and meadow-sweet. He must have been eighteen at the time. It was about a mile from his old home. He had strolled out of the garden-gate carrying his book, without any definite object. It was a cloudless summer day. Everything outside the garden radiated the heat of the sun which blazed down on the unsheltered road, and he had suddenly felt how delightful it would be to go and read by the river. He had turned into the hedge, climbed a gate, and, cutting across a meadow, he had struck a field-path which brought him soon within sight of the zig-zagging line of old willows and flowery undergrowth that bordered the river. At a point where the river took a sharp bend—a favourite haunt of his—he had pushed his way through the undergrowth, taking care not to trample down the flowers, and settled himself at full length in the shadow of a willow. Through a screen of meadow-sweet he could see the clear, dark water, endlessly and effortlessly swimming along in its chosen groove, and the flowery bank beyond. There the ground rose sharply and the slope was covered with beech-trees. Lichen-covered railings with a gate in them enclosed the beech-wood and railed it off from the river-bank ; and through the great drooping fans of beech-leaves,

Christopher from where he lay could see the ruddy brown of the beech-mast floor.

He did not open his Chaucer. He lay listening to the innumerable small noises around him ; the suddenly loud and suddenly faint buzz of bees and flies ; small scissor-like, or watery, or fluting voices of hidden birds ; the occasional discreet belch of a water-hen ; the subdued gurgling and knocking and chiming of the water. Under the strong fragrance of the meadow-sweet he could smell the green vegetable breath of growing plants and leaves, and the dark, earthy, faintly metallic smell of the river. The tall green stems of the willow-herb and the tall brown stems of the meadow-sweet towered above his head like a vast tropical jungle, and the sun-soaked and shadow-darkened scene beyond stood motionless as a dream.

Motionless until, through the green fans and silver trunks of the beeches, Christopher caught a flicker of white. At first he supposed it must have been a bird or a rabbit. He caught sight of it again, in another place ; a momentary flash among the green and brown and grey. Then he saw that it was a human being, a woman. He saw her skirt among the tree-trunks, and in a moment the whole woman appeared, dropping quickly down towards the gate near the river. Now she had reached the gate. She fumbled with her hands at the latch, but at once gave up the attempt to open it and climbed it with amusingly agile vigour.

She was hardly more than a girl, not much older than Christopher himself. He watched her idly. She came to the river-edge, looked quickly up and

down stream, then took off her hat, dropped it on the ground, and sat down beside it. What was she doing now ? The undergrowth hid all but the golden top of her head. She was not merely resting, for her head kept up a series of abrupt and busy movements.

Christopher was on the point of standing up to investigate when the girl rose to her feet. He could see all the upper part of her body now. She raised her hands to her throat and began, to Christopher's surprise, to unbutton her blouse. Suddenly, with a fluttering of the heart, he realised that she was undressing. He stirred cautiously and guiltily in his lair so as to concentrate his full attention upon her. He would have been ashamed if anyone had found him watching her, but he knew well enough that no one would find him and he was determined, whether or not it was reprehensible to spy, that he would do so. And so Christopher watched the girl while, with neat, assured gestures, she slipped her clothes off one by one until she stood completely naked. He gazed at her out of the meadow-sweet with bated breath. He had never thought that a naked woman, however young and slim, could be so lovely. His inquisitive excitement changed, at the sight of her, into rapt admiration. How different were the fluid lines and soft convexities of her body and limbs from the firm, square modelling of his own. She stepped to the water's edge, stooped down, and, propping herself on one bent arm, reached one leg and then another into the water. When she had got a foothold she stood up, and her white reflection flapped like a ragged white flag on the face of the dark river. She waded slowly forward with arms extended on each

side of her body, and as she waded the water crept upwards, enveloping first her knees, then her thighs, then slipping along the soft curves of her hips, encircling her waist, and climbing towards her two small breasts.

At that moment she threw her body forward and began to swim. At every stroke her golden head lifted forward and her shoulders rose dazzlingly sleek and white out of the water that dimmed the rest of her whiteness to a vaguely-seen, silvery shimmer. Nearer and nearer she came. Christopher could see her face distinctly now : it was charming in the fixed earnestness of its expression. Was she going to land on his side of the river ? If so, she would very likely discover him. His heart began to race with an ecstatic fear. What was he to do ? Suddenly he decided that if she found him he would shut his eyes and pretend to be asleep. But no ; she was turning away from the bank now. Her head and her arms ceased to move, and then she raised both arms above her head, dancing buoyantly up and down. Apparently she could just touch bottom. As she sank and rose, the water climbed to her neck, then slipped away over her shoulders like a glassy cloak.

But next moment, with a sudden loud splashing and rippling, she had launched herself forward again and was swimming back to where her clothes lay. Soon she was nearing the opposite bank ; he saw her stop, and then her body rose out of the river. The water reached only to her knees now. How glassily sleek her skin shone as she climbed on to the bank. She went to her clothes, stooped down, and

when she rose something white fluttered in her hand : she was drying herself. Soon she bobbed down behind the undergrowth, and Christopher could see by the movements of her head that she was hard at work.

In five minutes she was fully dressed and stood with both hands raised to her head, putting on her hat. Then, almost before Christopher realised that all was finished, she was climbing the gate into the beech-wood, and a minute later he saw the last white flicker of her high up the slope among the beech-trunks.

He heaved a deep sigh. It had been an exquisite revelation, a memory to be secretly cherished. Yet his mind, though thrilled, had remained curiously undisturbed, and as soon as she was out of sight he had opened his Chaucer and began to read with perfect self-possession.

The memory of that experience flowered in Christopher's mind now in a succession of quick visual flashes and fluctuating emotions, while another part of his mind noted the fact that the bus had passed the high portico of St. George's, Bloomsbury, and that the houses on the left had suddenly vanished to give place to the showering greens of the plane-trees of Bloomsbury Square. He rose from his seat and began staggering towards the stair, for the halt at the corner of Southampton Row and Theobald's Road was the place where he always got down.

CHAPTER VII

Having got down from the bus, Christopher crossed the road where the small trams from Highbury Barn pause before taking their roaring dive into the bowels of Kingsway to rumble out into daylight again on the Embankment under Waterloo Bridge. He passed the pavement-artist who squats beside his pictures, like an eastern sage, under the white wall of the London Day Training College, and soon he had crossed Holborn, passed the exit of Holborn tube station, and, after traversing about a third of Kingsway, turned left into the short eastern section of Great Queen Street, passed under the towering black flank of Newcastle House, which bestrides the pavement with its dark arcade, and emerged into the great, quiet square of Lincoln's Inn Fields.

The large, dignified houses, the wide roadway that lay before them, and the great green garden with its lawns, its centre dim under the huge leafy dome upheld by the pied trunks and branches of giant planes, formed a haven of repose after the glare and noise of Kingsway.

The place roused strangely poignant feelings in Christopher. He loved it, and yet he had often entered it with a heavy heart. He loved its beautiful houses : Newcastle House, with its noble, many-windowed front and the double flight of steps

curving up to its front door, and the fine, leisurely Renaissance houses next it on the western side of the square, one of them guarded by the two great brick gate-piers ; the curious little bow-windowed house in the south-western corner, hidden behind its covered iron verandahs, which give it a fantastic and almost Chinese air ; and the lovely, sober Queen Anne houses adjoining it, especially the two built of darkly smouldering brick, with their white porches, white string-courses, their many-paned windows that reflect the clouds, and the white cornices between the windows of the second and third storeys. These houses and the cool, shady garden never failed to charm him, and now once more, as he turned into the square, he felt its benign influence descend upon him, soothing his aching heart.

But, cutting across the consolation which the place never failed to bring, there was always for him the sense of tragedy ; for the place had been the background of so much joy and sorrow, of the eager enthusiasm of his marriage, his sudden agonising disappointment, and the moods fluctuating between despair and resignation which he had brought with him every week-day and carried away with him in the evening. He could not tell whether the place held more of consolation or of tragedy for him : all he knew was that its appeal was rich and deep and human. Under its influence he ceased to be a restless mote in the ephemeral ferment of modern London : it drew him out of himself into a wider and warmer life of leisurely continuity.

It was twenty-two minutes to ten. There were still seven minutes before his usual time for arriving at

the office. He saw the porch of the old house on the southern side of the square waiting for him, but he turned away and began walking along the north side, so as to approach the office by the longest way, three sides of the square instead of one.

Again he fell into the mood of detachment which had come upon him in bed that morning : again he felt alone, a lonely and helpless atom of life, a core of suffering in the general flux. Perhaps to suffer was his small particular function in the universal scheme, so that it was useless for him to struggle against it. He must carry his pain to and fro, as he was carrying it now, until his life ceased. Thinking of it thus as his appointed burden, Christopher felt it as a material thing, a lump, of which he was continuously conscious, suspended inside his body somewhere near his heart, secreting a bitter gall which subtly poisoned all his being.

He turned down the east side of the square, skirting the wall of Lincoln's Inn garden. His watch now showed three minutes to the quarter. Christopher dreaded the office more than usual to-day : he longed to play truant and wander aimlessly about town, for his pain was easier to bear when his body was occupied. He would have liked to stroll southwards towards Fleet Street and across it into the Temple, past the Round Church, under the cloister into Pump Court, cool and shadowy as a huge, empty cistern, and so past the Middle Temple Hall to the river. But whilst he was dreaming of that freedom his feet were carrying him along the south side of the square towards the too familiar porch, and as he crossed the yard of rough

paving that lay before it his heart sank lower and lower.

The porch swallowed him. How dark and cold it was inside. There was a smell of old wood and wet stone. Perhaps the charwoman had been washing the flagged floor of the hall. He began slowly to climb the stone stairs towards the door on the second floor on which was painted in black letters *Messrs. Templescombe & Brade*. He was tired. At every step his body seemed to get heavier and heavier, and he felt as if his energy, like an electric current, were leaking out at his heels. As he paused for a moment on the landing of the first floor he heard a clock chime the quarter. The doors of Messrs. Goodbody & Jackson, the one on the left labelled *Enquiries*, confronted him, and he stared back at them with the hatred of seven years of familiarity.

He turned from them and began to climb the next flight. Oh, the labour of it ! He could feel his heart knocking in his side. What bad training he must be in. Perhaps, he thought indifferently, there was something wrong with his heart. Not likely ! For physically he had always been as sound as a bell. As he reached the landing opposite his own door, he heard footsteps far below him. Cold and hollow they echoed in the hollow well of the stair. It would be old Templescombe, his partner. Yes, Christopher recognised his step ; and, looking over the banisters, he saw the old man's grey head slowly ascending. He was carrying his hat in his hand. Christopher waited for him, and in a moment he rounded the turning of the last flight.

" Hello, Christopher ! " he said, in his pleasant,

slightly ecclesiastical voice ; " lovely morning, isn't it ? " and, as they went into the office together, Templescombe invited Christopher into his room. " I want to talk over this business of young Ben coming in," he said.

Young Ben was his son. It was in the terms of the partnership that Ben should, if his father wished it, enter the office and in due course become a partner, and it had been agreed some months previously that he should come in before Christopher took his summer holiday.

" I think we shall find him pretty useful," said Templescombe, " after his two years with James & Weston, to say nothing of his other qualifications."

Christopher agreed. He thought it very probable that Ben, with his superior training and qualifications, would soon be a much more efficient member of the firm than himself, and he said so.

" Oh, come, come, Christopher ! " Templescombe replied, but Christopher knew that his disclaimer was based more on politeness than on conviction, for the old man had a just confidence in his son's efficiency.

When the date of Ben's entry into the office had been settled, Christopher went to his own room. As he closed the door a clock began to strike ten, and it seemed to Christopher, in his state of depression, that day after day, month after month, and year after year, a devilish fate had exposed him, defenceless, to those ten hammer-beats that struck upon his nerves till his reason staggered. " Still nine more," he thought. " How can I bear it ? "

Eight. An immense silence.

Seven. He was not yet nearly half-way through. He began to count rapidly, to see how many he could count between the strokes. Twelve ; he had counted twelve. He did so again, and again the clock struck exactly on his twelve. He did it a third time. There were still four more strokes to come. He was only just over half-way through the ordeal.

But that thought itself had disposed of another stroke. Only three strokes now. It was as if the clock were going to strike three o'clock. That was never difficult to bear.

Two more now. Clench your teeth for the two final blows.

But suddenly the thing became harmless, and Christopher listened to the two final strokes with interested detachment. The bell had, after all, rather a nice tone. But thank God, thank God it was over now. Once more time had become imperceptible. A blessed silence fluttered noiselessly about the room, shedding a balm on his bleeding nerves. He sat down at his desk, and at that moment the door opened and Pinson, the picture of deferential, middle-aged, efficient responsibility, came in with a selection of the morning's letters, already opened and docketed.

" Good morning, Pinson ! " said Christopher for the two thousand eight hundred and twenty-third time.

" Good morning, sir," replied Pinson. " A lovely morning, sir."

" Lovely, isn't it ? " replied Christopher.

Pinson began to place the letters, one by one,

before Christopher, making brief references to each. Occasionally Christopher made a pencil-note on one of them. When they had gone through them all, Christopher heaved a sigh.

" So much for that ! " he said. Then he glanced up at Pinson. " Do you ever feel, Pinson," he asked, " that you would like to clear out and leave all this ? "

" Clear out, sir ? " Pinson looked a little alarmed.

" I mean," Christopher explained, " don't you sometimes get tired of living in the same old rut ? Don't you feel, some mornings, that you'd like to pack up and clear out—leave not only the office, I mean, but home, wife, friends, everything ? "

Pinson, as far as correctness would permit, looked amused. " No, sir," he said ; " I can't say I do. Why, where should I go ? Besides, if I left the office I should have nothing to do, and then goodness knows how I should get through the day. Why, it's bad enough when my missus and I go for our fortnight to Worthing. I always find that at the end of the first week I've had enough of it. After a week time begins to hang heavy on my hands and I begin to look forward to getting back. And it's not as if I didn't feel at home at Worthing : we've been there, in the same rooms, every July for the last twenty years. But I'm always glad to get back to my own place and to regular hours. Sometimes, it's true, when my missus and I have had one of our little—well, differences, you know, sir, I've said to her, ' It would serve you right,' I've said, ' if I was to pack up and go off on my own.' But of course I don't mean it, and she knows I don't. She just laughs at me. ' I'd like to see you,' she says. After all, you

know, sir, you can't get on without a woman in the house, and me and my missus rub along pretty well. If I went further I might fare worse, as the saying is."

"In fact, you're content, Pinson?"

"Yes, I'm content, sir. It doesn't take much to satisfy me."

"You never even, for a moment, feel the lack of novelty or adventure in your life?"

"Adventure, sir?" Pinson smiled. "Not me, sir. Adventures wouldn't suit me. I like to know where I am. I've always thought myself lucky in being over age when the war started. Excuse me, sir; I think that was Mr. Templescombe's bell."

Pinson went sedately to the door to answer Mr. Templescombe's bell for the thirty-six thousandth time, and Christopher, after staring blindly in front of him for a moment, turned with an abrupt movement to the papers that lay before him and lost himself in business matters.

CHAPTER VIII

For two hours Christopher sat absorbed in work. He had ceased to be a creature wounded and suffering in a world of such relentless reality that it was almost unbearable. Like a beneficent anæsthetic, the mechanic world of business had numbed his emotional life, and he sat, absent, insentient, and efficient, oblivious of his surroundings and of himself. Then with a deep breath, he threw himself back in his chair, stretched his arms and legs, and awoke with the surprise of a patient coming-to to the familiar presence of his room.

With the realisation of that presence came also the sense of an inner presence—a small, burning core inside him. Again for a brief moment, as earlier that morning, he could not tell whether it was the glow of some unwonted happiness or the searing fire of misery. Then, as if at the sudden opening of a door, the lurid light of his quarrel with Rosamund flooded his mind, and again her face, white and twisted with hatred, rose and confronted him. He blinked his eyes. The ghost vanished, and his office, calm and stubborn, resumed its possession of his senses. How intimate, how terribly intimate it was to him, as if, during these seven years, the crass, material things that composed it had taken advantage of his frequent

defencelessness to bite themselves like acid into his heart.

Gazing at it now, he succeeded with an effort in recalling the impression it had made on him at his first acquaintance with it. Though nothing had been changed in the room, that early impression was entirely different from the impression it made on him now. For an intense moment the sense of it penetrated him to the soul, wavered, grew blurred, and suddenly vanished, overshadowed by the denser reality of the present. Then he caught it again, a brief but potent flavour no sooner recognised than lost. There was something exquisitely fresh and innocent in that memory, like the dream of a long-forgotten spring ; for it was soaked in the brief rapture of his first year of marriage, the rapture of a man intoxicated with life. He had walked the world, during that year, as a radiant god disguised in a black coat, grey trousers, and a bowler. But now that impression was overlaid by the tragedy which had followed so soon. The whole aspect of the room was saturated with bitter memories, and Christopher began to wonder if the man had ever existed who could see things as they were. For the pulsing heart of man is like a fire that changes all that comes near it. We project our joys and sorrows into the material world about us till each familiar tree and stone is transformed from its own free nature into a symbol and receptacle for our emotions. None but the very happy, reflected Christopher, should stay in a place long enough to allow it to absorb his emotions, for the emotions so absorbed are perpetuated, and lie in

wait for him at every turn. Every chair, table, wall, or tree stands there as a witness of his past agonies. It is better to fly from every haunt before it becomes contaminated with the poison of our living tragedies or our dead joys, and to seek always fresh scenes which may nourish us with new and unfamiliar food.

" Whom am I pretending to benefit," Christopher suddenly asked himself, " by staying, like a jackal that haunts the ruins, among all this wreckage ? " Not himself, certainly ; and not Rosamund. It would be a severe shock to her, it was true, if he were to leave her, but only to her worse nature, the nature that saved appearances to disguise realities and drove her to obey, not her sense of honour and decency, but her fear of other people's opinions. And yet he felt somehow responsible. The united life of himself and Rosamund had failed hopelessly, and yet he felt that if he were to run away he would be shirking responsibility. But it is folly, and not courage, to assume responsibility for what we cannot control.

If he retained two hundred and fifty pounds a year for himself, he reflected, he could hand over an income of five hundred to Rosamund, which would at least leave her independent. As for his business, his going would not cause more than a slight temporary inconvenience to old Templescombe, for Ben would replace him very efficiently. There was nothing, then, to hold him back.

And yet he knew instinctively that he would not go. A fatal inertia, disguising itself as common sense, sense of decency, consideration for others, numbed

his heart at the bare thought of taking any action. The mere breaking-away would demand, he felt, an energy and courage which he no longer possessed. If it were a question of energy alone, he might be able to rouse himself at last to action ; but courage failed him. Courage for what? Surely to leave surroundings which reminded him at every turn of disappointment and misery, to leave a companion who seemed deliberately to seek to pain him, did not require courage. More courage was implied in staying and facing such conditions. That was what common sense would argue. Yet Christopher knew that it was cowardice and not courage that held him back, for it is cowardice that takes the line of least resistance, however painful it may be.

Yes, he was afraid. Like Pinson, he was afraid of the unknown. But it was not the material unknown that he feared : what he feared was loneliness. Emotionally he was so defenceless. Mental suffering had worn down his resistance and self-reliance. He was afraid, horribly afraid, that, if he went away with the wound in his heart still unhealed and the wrench of tearing himself from Rosamund aggravating the pain of it, a black misery would descend upon him from which he would never emerge. He could not face the prospect of new torture. Rather he would hug the old ; the familiar was always easier to bear than the strange and unforeseen. And, after all, argue and reason as he might, there remained as the supreme deterrent Rosamund herself.

Though resentment and fatigue sometimes clouded his perception of it, he was still inextricably bound to

her. Yes, it would be impossible for him to leave her. He threw back his head sharply, as if dismissing the idea from his mind. And yet, what was the alternative? The alternative was what he had been all day rebelling against so desperately. If it was impossible to leave Rosamund, it was equally impossible to stay. Life with her had become unbearable for lack of the one thing that would make it not only bearable, but completely satisfying.

But why was it that, after all these years, his endurance had finally broken down this morning? It had begun with the realisation that he was already middle-aged and that life was slipping away from him unenjoyed. It was because, instead of drifting unhappily as he had done for so long, he had paused for a moment to face the facts. Had he unconsciously been hoping and believing all this time that everything would eventually come right between himself and Rosamund, and that his desperate need to love and to be loved would once more be satisfied? Apparently he had; for without some kind of hope he would never have been able to support such unhappiness for so long. But when he had faced the facts, immediately he had been assailed by a gnawing fear that these hopes were unfounded, that he was waiting and waiting for something that would never happen, and that when he was already old, when it was already too late, he would awake to an appalling disillusionment.

At the realisation of that he felt a kind of panic. To envisage the fact that the cravings of his heart and the healthy lusts of his body would remain for ever unsatisfied was like staring death in the face.

He saw now that the rest of his life would be a long-drawn living death, a state worse, much worse, than extinction. His misery, diluted and unanalysed for so long, had at last crystallised into this one fact, that a life without love is unendurable.

His thoughts returned to that day, recalled when walking round Lincoln's Inn Fields an hour or two ago, on which he had watched the girl bathing. If only he could recover the tranquillity of mind of those early days, before sexual love had become the whole meaning of his life, his present life might be made bearable and even happy. But he could not wish that innocence back again : to do so would have been to wish to abolish the greatest gift of life. No : having received the gift, he would hold fast to it, whatever miseries it brought with it. That first exquisite glimpse had hardly disturbed the virginity of his mind. It was not till several years later that sex began to assume a considerable significance for him, and when it did so it was not only a matter of physical desire, but also one of curiosity, a curiosity similar to the longing for new experience which had driven him to foreign travel and to books.

He had become aware that he possessed unused capacities, that the world held experiences for him from which he was holding back. The fastidious, emotional side of him was afraid, but the intellectual and the animal urged him until their insistence became an obsession.

He held back for a long time, his innocence and cleanness of mind repelled by the conditions under which, so often, that experience must be gained. But by degrees he came to feel that there was something

morbid in his innocence, which was, after all, much more a timid squeamishness than a true innocence of heart. He was ashamed, too, of his inexperience, and the physical desire of healthy youth began to tease him and to assume far too large an importance in his mind.

His first experience of physical love rose in his memory now, and, staring at the office-window, beyond which the plane-trees of the square spread the fresh greenery of their young leaves, he began to relive it as he had relived the earlier memory of the bathing girl.

He was already twenty-four then. For the last year he had been living in a bedroom and a sitting-room on a second floor in Bloomsbury, making a small income by book-reviewing and occasional articles for the weeklies. In all but the one vital experience he was grown-up and independent. His innocence weighed upon him like a sense of guilt : he felt confusedly that he was somehow sinning against himself.

One day he had resolved at length that for the sake of his peace of mind he must force himself to go through the initiation. He had come, in his morbid concern with it, to look upon it not in the least as a pleasure or a piece of self-indulgence, but as a formal duty to himself. The sooner he got it over, the sooner it would be off his mind. That very evening he would set about it.

And yet, when he thought of the prostitutes whom he passed in Shaftesbury Avenue or Southampton Row, he felt that it would be impossible. In his innocent eyes they were horrible. He was afraid of

them, and he was afraid, too, of his patent inexperience. But why was he forcing himself to do what he did not want to do? Why not dismiss the thing from his mind?

But no: that was the counsel of cowardice. If he listened to it, the whole problem would begin over again later on, and meanwhile the obsession would continue to bother him. He was determined to go through with it. For fear that thinking of it should weaken his resolution, he dismissed it from his mind as a thing settled; but throughout the day he was aware of its presence in the sense of excitement and dread which lurked like a ghost at the back of his mind.

In those days he took all his meals except breakfast at restaurants, and, when he left his rooms that evening for the small Italian restaurant in Greek Street where he usually dined, he felt that his grim adventure had suddenly drawn disturbingly near. "When I return," he thought to himself, as he shut the front door of his lodgings, "it will be an accomplished fact. I shall be bringing home the experience with me." At that thought he felt a deep satisfaction. "But suppose I don't," he thought next moment; "suppose I daren't. Suppose I come back no different from now." His heart sank in anticipation of the dead weight of failure of purpose and of the continued oppression of his undesired innocence.

But, once out of doors, he shook off all thought of the adventure before him, and during the walk to his restaurant he held it still at arm's length, fixing his attention on the shops and traffic and the stream of men and women in which he moved.

Looking back at those distant days, Christopher suddenly felt sorry for that lonely young man, with whom he now felt so little identity, hurrying along under the stress of his secret trouble. How extraordinary, how absorbingly interesting it would be, he thought, if one could look back and actually see oneself, ten, twenty, or thirty years ago. He could not imagine even vaguely how he must have looked. There was a photograph of him at that age, but photographs leave out almost everything—walk, gestures, manner, all but one of the human face's countless expressions, isolating that one and fixing it in an artificial immutability. Cinematography can do it, but the cinema selects only the movements of the eminent for preservation.

He had ordered a bottle of wine with his dinner, but found that it affected him much less than usual, and he lingered on over a cup of coffee, at one moment bracing himself to pay his bill and go, at the next, indulging himself with another respite. When at last he started it was almost without an effort, as if by accident.

He walked down Greek Street, turned to the left at the bottom into Cambridge Circus, and skirted the front and south side of the Palace, pausing to inspect the photographs that hung on the walls between the various entrances. Then he crossed the road and walked down Shaftesbury Avenue, past the shop-windows resplendent with women's dresses, towards Piccadilly Circus. Sometimes he shot a fugitive glance at the women who strolled past him. Their eyes met his with a bold query from which his at once leapt aside. It was the first time he had

observed them with any attention, and he was shocked at the harshness and callousness of their veiled solicitations. His innocent soul cried out for some hint of delicacy, some saving illusion of gentleness. Despair came over him, and, sick at heart, he turned into a by-street, and out of it into another.

It was one of those streets in which shops and small restaurants are incidental and not continuous. In front of some of the houses, railings on either side of the door fence the pavement from the narrow pit of the basement. Christopher began to walk slowly up it. It was sparsely sprinkled with walking figures. Half-way up its length, two women stood on the edge of the pavement, talking. A third passed Christopher and wished him good night, with a sharp glance. With a palpitating heart he moved on. Leaning against one of the area-railings not far ahead of him, her hands clasped in front of her, he saw a soberly dressed young woman. He glanced shyly at her as he approached her, and noticed that she had a pretty little face with an amusing turned-up nose. She was neither powdered nor painted. " If only they were like her," he thought, catching her eye as he passed her.

He had already passed her when, to his amazement, he heard a soft " Hello ! " He turned round. She was looking shyly after him. With a fluttering heart he stopped and then went back.

She was as shy as he was.

" Let us walk on," he said, afraid of attracting attention.

They went slowly down the street together.

" Where do you live ? " Christopher asked her.

" Near Paddington Station," she said.

Christopher hesitated. " We might get the tube at Piccadilly Circus," he suggested.

" Oh, but I can't take you home," said the girl, realising what he meant. " I know a place near here——"

Christopher was alarmed. " Is it—is it all right ? " he asked.

" Oh, quite," said the girl. " Very nice. Electric stoves in every room. You'll have to pay, though, of course." And like conspirators they began to talk about money.

As they talked, she led him along one by-street after another—what streets Christopher never knew, for he was too moved to notice. How strange it all was ; and the girl seemed quite a nice little thing.

Suddenly she turned into the doorway of a bright, clean-looking public-house.

" Go straight upstairs," she said to him. " I'll follow you in half a second."

Christopher, feeling like a criminal, began to climb the stairs. The girl had vanished into a half-open doorway. Before he reached the landing she was following him, and they went together into a bedroom on the first floor, a small, clean room, brightly lit.

Christopher shut and locked the door, and the girl crossed the room to the fireplace and stooped down. There was a click and then a glow of warm yellow light. " Very handy, these electric stoves," she said.

A knock at the door made Christopher's heart leap to his throat, but the girl reassured him. " It'll be them with the bill," she said.

Christopher opened the door. A waiter presented a bill for one double room. Christopher paid it and shut and locked the door again.

What an extraordinary chance that he should have met her on that particular night. It was as if a kind fate had interposed to shield him from his own recklessness. For in that first experience of physical love into which he had forced himself so cold-bloodedly and so timorously, his innocence was spared the cold rebuff which it would have suffered at the lack of all but the merely animal. For at heart she was as innocent as he was, and a charming friendliness sprang up between them in that first and last meeting. Christopher recalled now how freely and intimately they had chattered. There had been something very touching in her childish volubility. She had told him of her father and her brother, of how her father had died five years ago and her brother was in the navy ; and in her anxiety that Christopher should know about them she had got out of bed to bring from the dressing-table an imitation gold chain on which hung a locket containing on one side a photograph of her father and one of her brother on the other. Instead of feeling timid and inexperienced as he had expected, Christopher had felt himself years older than this garrulous child whose ingenuousness roused in him a brotherly concern on her behalf. What in the world, he wondered, could have thrown her among the women of the street, whom she seemed so utterly unlike. He asked her if she often came to the street where he had found her.

She understood at once the meaning of his question.

" Oh, I'm not one of them," she said ; " don't think it. My job's washing dishes ; in a restaurant, you know. It's a nasty job. You get so wet, you see, even when you wear an apron. And the pay's bad. That's why I try to make a little extra sometimes. Two of my friends told me how they managed, and asked me to go along with them one night after work. An extra ten bob comes in useful sometimes, I can tell you."

Even now Christopher remembered her name, Rose Deacon ; but he had forgotten her face. All he remembered of it was that it was pretty and that it had an amusing little turned-up nose. But that evening remained in his mind as something spring-like and lyrical and curiously innocent, and he remembered, too, with great vividness, the sense of exultation and release which glowed round him like an aureole as he walked home that night.

As he put his latchkey into the lock he had triumphantly confronted that other self who had imposed this adventure upon him and threatened him with haunting unhappiness if he came home with the adventure unfulfilled. He felt that he had shaken off a crippling infirmity, that at last he was a man, and when he awoke next morning the exultation still glowed about him, and it had remained undimmed for many a month afterwards.

Poor little Rose ! Where and what was she now ? He still felt a brotherly tenderness for her which, if she could know of it, would certainly surprise her now, for she must long since have forgotten him. She belonged, for him, to another world : though he still moved through the same scenes—Piccadilly

Circus, Shaftesbury Avenue, Oxford Street, Southampton Row—they had changed as he had changed. And when in a vivid and elusive flash of memory he sometimes saw them again as they used to be, he was amazed at the profound difference of feeling they produced in him, and again he realised how impossible it is for a man to see things as they are.

But perhaps the phrase " things as they are " has no meaning : perhaps things consist solely of the qualities we thrust upon them and the associations by which we link them up with other things. All we know of anything is what our senses and our emotions tell us about it, and if, after an interval of time, they tell us something different from before, we can only suppose that the thing itself has changed. Yet each man's idea of the nature of the change will always be different from another's. Well, the only permissible deduction from that is that each man is right.

Christopher's mind stood still, bewildered by the intricate ramifications of which this mystery of the influence of men on things and things on men was capable. We project our influence upon things and they, armed with the being with which we have endowed them, throw back, like reflecting and distorting mirrors, that influence upon us, encompassing us, enticing us into their power, binding us with old associations, until our lives are so embedded in theirs that only death can tear them free.

Christopher gazed round that office room, so full of his dead and his living selves, and felt that he was in a cage to which, even when the door was open and he had escaped, he would be compelled by the inescapable tyranny of custom to return. He hated

it. But if he had solely hated it he could have escaped. What held him captive was that he loved it too. It was too much saturated with the brief ecstasy of the one happy year of his life with Rosamund, too eloquent of her as she had then been, for him to hate it whole-heartedly. Again the white-faced ghost with hatred in its eyes rose up to torture him, and he almost called out her name aloud in horrified deprecation.

As if in answer to that unuttered call, the door opened and the junior clerk appeared. " Mrs. Brade is on the telephone, sir."

Christopher rose from his desk and went to the telephone which was in the clerks' office. Rosamund? What could she want? She had not rung him up at the office for years.

CHAPTER IX

Rosamund, having left the dining-room after Christopher's early departure, went to the drawing-room and began to move chairs and tables. The room always required some re-arrangement when they were having more than one couple to dinner, and it amused Rosamund to change its appearance and to try the effect of new arrangements. After moving one or two chairs and a small table, she retired to the door and seriously contemplated the effect of the change, and once she even went out of the room altogether and then made a quick re-entry, in the hope that the new aspect would catch her unawares and so enable her to judge it without prejudice.

When she had accomplished this task to her satisfaction, she sat down at a small bureau, which was her own private writing-table, and began to make a shopping-list of the things required for the dinner. She delighted in these preparations, and she would now have been perfectly happy if it had not been for her doubts as to whether Christopher would return for the dinner. She could no longer disguise from herself the fact that the prospect of his not returning alarmed her seriously. Though she had assured herself that it would be simple to explain his absence, she felt now that all sorts of inconsistencies and contradictions might crop up with

which she would be unable to cope ; and, even if they did not, the need to keep up a pretence all the evening would ruin her enjoyment. How annoying it was. It was all Christopher's fault, too. Why on earth had he broken out like that this morning ? He had no right to speak to her as he had done. Whenever her anxiety returned to her she repeated these phrases to herself in order to silence the small voice of conscience which kept whispering to her accusingly that she had goaded him beyond endurance. All this while, it told her, she had been wantonly playing with fire, wantonly teasing him and goading him because it was so easy to do so with impunity ; and now at last the full and inevitable consequences of her wantonness, so long delayed, had come down upon her. There had been something horrible in the fact she had actually broken down his endurance : it was as if she had destroyed something in him. His outburst had made her realise fully for the first time the atrocious cruelty of her treatment of him, and it frightened her. It was as if she had for the moment driven him mad. But it was only, surely, for the moment. Already he must have recovered his habitual patience and serenity. All the same, it had frightened her horribly. She determined never to behave like that again.

And yet, would she be able to prevent herself? For though one half of her respected and loved . . . Loved ? As the word entered her thoughts she was up in arms at once. No, she would never admit that she loved him. Hadn't she always assured him that she didn't ? But one half of her, the good half,

respected him and liked him : she admitted that freely.

Why was it, then, that some perverse devil drove her so often into an uncontrollable antipathy to him and compelled her to withdraw hands and eyes and heart whenever he appealed to her ? But what else could she do ? Even as she thought of it now, coolly and alone, she felt her whole nature rise in instant rebellion, as it always did on such occasions. What, then, could she do ? for no one can fight against nature. Yes, that was it : it was because Christopher had persuaded her to do violence to her nature and to believe that she loved him and to consent to marry him, that her nature now reasserted itself and turned against him. It was his own fault, and now he was reaping the reward of his stubbornness and obtuseness. She had always prophesied that disaster would come of it ; and, after all, it was much worse for her than for him. He had brought misery on them both ; and now, as if that were not enough, he had turned on her and accused her in the most outrageous fashion. It was unjust, horribly unjust.

So Rosamund sat fuming to herself with her arms lying on the desk, her right hand, with the pencil between its fingers, raised above the pad on which she had been writing. She had forgotten all about her shopping-list ; she had even forgotten that she was in the drawing-room.

A vague noise from the square outside recalled her to herself. The wildly dancing fantoms of her mind vanished like a witches' sabbath, and, with a rapid glance about her to recover her bearings, she once more concentrated her attention on the list.

Having finished it, she went to the kitchen and spent half an hour in discussing the impending dinner with her cook, and when that was over she went up to her bedroom to get ready to go out. Shopping, on such an occasion as this, was one of the things she most enjoyed. How delightful it would have been now, if it had not been for this disturbing doubt about Christopher's return. That would spoil the whole morning for her. If only she could ring him up and discover for certain.

But what could she say, if she *did* ring him up? She couldn't ask him, point-blank, if he was coming home. She might perhaps ask him to buy some necessary thing on his way back. His reply would indicate whether he intended to come home or not. But that would be such an obvious pretext, for Christopher knew well enough that she herself was going out shopping this morning. He would know at once that she was ringing him up merely as an excuse to speak to him, and would probably assume that she was trying to make a gesture of reconciliation, almost an apology, even though her words were only of shops and shopping. That gesture must come from him, not from her. She longed to be free of this thunder-cloud which had engulfed them, but she could never bring herself to make the sign that would drive it away. No, *he* must apologise : provided he did so she would willingly forgive and forget.

She stood now before the mirror with her arms raised, putting on her hat, and the question of ringing Christopher up, forgotten for a moment, returned and buzzed about her like a troublesome

fly. Suddenly she felt tired : her mind could not cope with the task—so desolatingly trivial, yet so important for her peace of mind—of inventing a sufficient reason for ringing up the office. But something must be done : she could not bear the prospect of carrying this harassing uncertainty about with her until evening. She drew on her gloves, opened a drawer and took out the little bag that held her purse, handkerchief, and latch-key, and, leaving her bedroom, she began to go downstairs.

Then it was that she remembered the wine. They had not decided what wines they were to have. Rosamund knew nothing about wines : she always left that to Christopher. It was he who ordered it as it was required, and he who kept the key of the small cupboard in the basement which was all the cellar they had. Rosamund shuddered at the thought that if she had not, by a mere accident, remembered it now, she might never have thought of it until they had already sat down to dinner. What an appalling situation it would have been, for, if Christopher had not returned, they would have had no wine at all. What on earth would Sir Edward and Lady Brawnton have thought ? She would never have been able to look them in the face again. At all costs she must know if Christopher was coming, for if not she would have to consult someone in the wine department at Harrod's.

But to ring him up about the wine would at once betray her misgivings. There was nothing for it : she must pretend to consult him about something else. The fish ! That would do perfectly.

Trout was Christopher's favourite fish : they had

always had trout on his birthday until recent years. She would ask him what he would like in case she could not get trout. It could not be helped if he took it as an unspoken apology for their quarrel. She went to the telephone in the front hall and rang him up.

" Is that you, Christopher ? "

" Yes." His voice sounded gruff and uncompromising.

" I wanted to ask you about the fish to-night. Of course I shall try to get trout, but, if I can't, what would you like ? "

There was a moment's silence ; then Christopher's voice came again. " Get whatever you like."

" Some salmon ? " she suggested.

" Yes, that'll do splendidly." His voice was perceptibly more friendly.

" And Christopher ! You're remembering about the wine ? "

" Rather. I'll see to that."

" Good-bye, then." She heaved a sigh of relief as she hung up the receiver. Yes, a weight had been lifted from her mind. It had been nice, too, to hear his voice and feel that the quarrel was forgotten. In her relief she felt a little glow of friendliness for him. After all, perhaps she would be able to give him the cigarette-box.

CHAPTER X

As Rosamund had feared, Christopher had taken her telephone-call as an unspoken repentance, and he had been deeply touched by it. He knew her well enough to know that her pride would never have allowed her to apologise explicitly, but this wordless endeavour, as it had seemed to him, to convey her desire for reconciliation was enough for him. There was something endearing in its very inarticulateness, which seemed to be trying to convey the mute appeal of all that was kindest in her, that he would disregard her besetting pride and understand what she was powerless to utter. His heart went out to her : he felt that they had for a moment joined hands across the impassable barrier which had separated them for so long. Poor little Rosamund ! Once again he realised that it was a malevolent fate, rather than any deliberate fault of hers or his, that held them so inexorably apart. Yet, none the less, the gulf was there, and he reminded himself bitterly that any sign Rosamund might show of a desire to be reconciled could mean nothing more than a brief fluctuation in their persistent antagonism. To believe again that they might be reconciled, to thrill once more with the hope that all would be well between them, and then again to suffer the horrible pain of

disillusionment, would be more painful to him now than to live in a settled hostility.

For he was tired, utterly tired, of suffering ; so tired that he had come at last to dread any sign of kindness in her as the threat of yet another wrench to the tense nerve of his misery. To-day especially, after the horror of their quarrel at breakfast, he longed for mere peace, peace in which his overwrought emotions could pause and grow a little calm, and peace, too, in which to think.

In his desire to think, he was not aware of any desire to come to a conclusion : the kind of thinking of which he felt such a need was that in which he had been indulging to-day ever since he awoke in the first dark hours—a thinking which was simply a rich, warm immersion in the past, effortless and peaceful. He did not know what would be the outcome of such thought, but he felt instinctively that by this gathering of himself together—not only the self of the moment, but all those diverse selves of the past—he would become again a creature self-contained and self-directing and cease to be what he had been for the last seven years, a maimed and drifting wreck, the prey of every tide.

Perhaps it was because there seemed to be no future before him, because his life had reached a dead-end, that he was thus driven back on the past ; for from the past he could still draw the breath of life which the present denied him. He remembered now how, once before in his life, when he was still young, his whole existence had seemed to lose its sap and to wither away. It was a few years after that brief meeting with little Rose Deacon, which

he had been recalling when Rosamund rang him up.

During all that time, except for occasional visits to his home, he had lived in the same rooms in London, making a small income by book-reviewing and other free-lance work. Most of each day had been spent in reading and writing, and all the exercise he took was to walk to and from the places where he lunched and dined. During all that time he had felt desperately lonely. It was not that he had no friends in town : what depressed him was living alone and taking so many of his meals alone, and the absence of a companion on whose company he could always rely.

He had felt, too, an endless longing for someone on whom to expend his unused capacity for love, but he had not yet met the girl he wished to marry, and even if he were to do so, he would not be able to afford to marry for years. His whole being craved for love, a love that would satisfy body, mind, and soul ; for he had soon discovered after that first evening with Rose Deacon that the assuaging of merely physical desires could bring no lasting satisfaction and often brought little else than disgust. He felt instinctively that to indulge those desires at the expense of mind and soul would spoil him for the true love when it came, and so he foreswore women and bore the burden of the flesh.

There was another burden. The burden of intellect oppressed him more and more. To be compelled to read books, many of which did not interest him in the least, and to be compelled to form opinions about them and to put those opinions into some sort of literary form, became for him a crushing incubus.

His first enthusiasm for reading and writing and the reasoned exposition of his ideas soon withered under the monotony of overwork, and he came to believe that he hated all books and that argument and reasoning were a futile game and his own opinions unstable and valueless.

What was the use of all this dreary outpouring of opinions on the opinions of others? Even artistic creation, it seemed to him, was nothing more than life at second hand; and, if this were so, the reviewing and criticising of the creative work of others was life at third hand, and the reviewing of the criticism of others was life at fourth hand—a sort of sluggish mortification. How passionately he longed to escape from this artificially induced disease of thought, to live violently and intensely with soul and body, to burn with a bright, clear flame instead of smouldering, choked down under heaps of rubbish.

This state of mind had no doubt been aggravated by his lack of physical exercise. He was cut off now from all the games he had loved; his vigorous young body was starved of all the activities which had fed its strength and nimbleness and had kept his mind clear and alert. And so he had come to feel, as he felt now, oppressed in mind, unused in body, a mere husk empty of everything but a dull misery.

But in those earlier days he had had his rare moments of recovery. A concert, a picture, a lovely day, or some unaccountable thrill of the heart would suddenly irradiate his mind with a glow of the old happiness. But these moments came seldom: they had not been frequent enough to relieve the crushing sense that his life had reached a dead-end.

Christopher remembered still that terrible night when he had at last succumbed to his depression. He had been feeling vaguely unwell for some days, and so had been less than usually able to defend himself against despair ; and, returning to his rooms late in the evening after a lonely dinner, he had sat down at the desk in his sitting-room, laid his arms on the writing-pad and his head on his arms, and quietly begun to cry. He had not tried to stop himself. He had wept on, feeling a kind of relief in resigning himself to the physical expression of his pent-up misery.

In the agitation which that memory produced in him still, after an interval of thirteen years, Christopher rose from his office chair and, without realising what he was doing, went over to the mantelpiece, where, with that curious aimless absorption in actual objects which often follows a spell of day-dreaming, he began to examine the things that stood upon it. He stared at the old mahogany clock with its face of engraved steel, on which the maker's name—John Humphrey—appeared in a finely wrought calligraphy. He had never before noticed how perfectly adapted as a design were the two words and the flourishes that played about them. Near the clock stood a weighing-machine for letters, of an old and beautiful pattern. Nowadays the letters were weighed and stamped in the clerks' office, and the old weighing-machine had become no more than an ornament. Christopher laid his finger on the little brass scale and alternately depressed and released it, watching the counterpoise, on its arm curved like a limb of an anchor, dance up and down in response.

The next object to draw his attention was a black marble paper-weight carved in the form of a toad. His hand closed over it and lifted it up, and in a flash he remembered how, eight years ago, a few months before their wedding, Rosamund had come to the office for the first time, and had stood with her back to the mantelpiece and her shoulders leaning against it, talking to him. She had taken up the black toad, and while she talked she played with it, weighing it in her hand and stroking it, and laying its hard, polished blackness against her soft, rose-petal face. Everything about her, it had seemed to him in those days, possessed a lovely springlike freshness ; and as she stood there talking charmingly, full of quick animation, her bright presence had filled the sober, old-fashioned room with light and fragrance. It had seemed to him almost incredible, as he stood delightedly watching her and drinking her beauty in, that all this loveliness would soon belong to him.

And it seemed as incredible now, as his thoughts were suddenly wrenched back to the present, that she was irrevocably lost to him, that nothing short of turning time backwards could restore her to him. Yes ; now, much more surely than in those early days in London, his life had reached a dead-end ; and as his thoughts turned back to that younger Christopher, with whom he could now hardly identify himself, he felt a kind of comradeship in misery with the young man who sat weeping with his head on his arms.

Yet their two cases were different. For what escape was there for him now? But the younger

Christopher had escaped : suddenly, in a day, he had broken free from that backwater of despair and recaptured his lost momentum.

For suddenly and unexpectedly had come the war, sweeping him out of himself and his private miseries like a straw on a tidal wave.

At first, like many others, he had taken it for granted that the Army would cope with the situation : that was what armies were for. There seemed to be a general belief, when the first troops embarked for France, that they would be back for Christmas. Responsible persons were reported to have said that the war would certainly be over by then : besides, it had always been in the nature of things that everybody should be at home for Christmas. But, when Kitchener declared that it would last for at least four years, Christopher felt a horrible sinking of the heart. For the first time he understood the extreme seriousness of the situation, and as day by day the newspapers announced the fall of Belgian fortresses which had been stated to be impregnable —Liège, Namur, Antwerp—and hinted that even the Channel ports might be captured and England herself come within easy range of bombardment, a kind of desperation came upon him. All the old assurances, the old securities, were dissolving before his eyes : the common well-being and safety which had always been an integral part of life, things as unquestionable and as firmly based as the foundations of the world itself, were crumbling away like sand in flowing water.

The Army, as a career, had never once entered Christopher's head. He had always held drill in

horror, and had firmly refused to join his school rifle-corps. But now that men of his age were rushing to the recruiting offices, and even a few of his own friends had joined up, he saw clearly and definitely that he must join up too. It was no matter of deep thought or inward struggle : the convictions and prejudices of his whole life dispersed as easily as thistledown before the wind : he arrived at the most momentous decision of his life, the most drastic piece of self-coercion to which he had ever submitted himself, with hardly any sense of effort. It was almost as if he were plunging into the greatest experience of his life in a spirit of light-hearted frivolity.

But in truth there was no frivolity in his decision. It had been impulsive, but the impulse had come from his soul. The revolution in him had been so complete that the worst in him had gone down without a struggle before the best. So, perhaps, are all truly momentous acts achieved.

So Christopher had abandoned the past. Suddenly and completely the continuity of his life had been broken off short : he had flung off the old life as a man flings off a coat and, as it were, begun again in a new world. He recalled how, one day early in September 1914, he and three of his friends had sat for hours on the curbstone outside the headquarters of a London infantry battalion, waiting their turn, in an immense queue of young men, to go in and offer themselves as soldiers. At last, late in the evening, the thing was accomplished. They had signed various papers, passed the medical examination, taken the oath, and received orders to parade

next morning in a neighbouring square ; and all four of them had gone off to celebrate the occasion by a dinner at Frascati's.

They were all in the highest spirits. As for Christopher, the growing burden of the last four years had fallen from his shoulders : in the twinkling of an eye the pallid ghosts of intellect and introspection had vanished. He had suddenly become himself again, and, as he sat eating and drinking and chattering with his friends, it seemed to him that this evening was the happiest of his life. It was as well that none of them knew that in a year's time only Christopher, of them all, would be alive.

Following that evening had come days of drilling in Regent's Park and on Hampstead Heath ; hot, strenuous, happy days in which life was directed to one single, supremely practical end. There was no longer any doubt for Christopher about the use of his labours ; for he was convinced that he was doing what at that time was the supremely useful and the supremely disinterested thing. How glad he had been to escape from himself, to immerse himself in those crowds of willing and eager young men. Life and all the customs and mechanism of life had been transformed. The young men had taken charge of things : they would see to it that England was safe, and England, in return, petted and adored them.

Christopher himself, now that he had flung off the old, stale security and freely given his life to a cause that might preserve or destroy it, felt more than ever before, strangely and completely safe. It was not merely that the old secure life had been dull and monotonous and the novelty and prospect of

danger in the new were exciting : his feeling sprang from something deeper than that. It sprang from the fact that he had instantly obeyed what was best in him, that he had acted upon the impulse of a profound conviction. In that, his soul had found freedom. As the months went by, some of the first eagerness and enthusiasm had been blunted by the monotony of training and the countless irritations and stupidities and inhumanities of army life, but the sense of security, though it sometimes lay dormant, had remained with him to the end. It had been proof even against the horrors of France.

What a marvellous relief it had been, in those first weeks, to have ceased suddenly to think and rationalise and drift aimlessly along the narrow channel of his life in London, and, instead, to have handed himself over to an authority which demanded nothing of him but unquestioning obedience and an expenditure of physical energy ; for nothing is so refreshing as a willing obedience. All the intellectual and æsthetic activities had been abruptly cancelled from his life. The tiresome exploitation of his intelligence had stopped short : from morning to night it was unnecessary for him even to think or express an opinion. There was hardly time or opportunity even to read : for weeks he studied nothing but the daily papers. It was like returning to the nursery. Herded together like a huge family, in a large empty house, he and his fellow Tommies led the life of children, sometimes quarrelling, sometimes breaking out into loud complaints, but generally rubbing along in willing obedience and boisterous good-humour.

But Christopher's greatest satisfaction had come

from the liberation of his body. Once more life demanded of him the strenuous employment of limb and muscle : his whole duty consisted in marching, doubling, carrying heavy loads, digging, and executing the strange movements and postures of " physical jerks." Once again he became conscious of his body as a perfectly working machine ; he was acutely aware of the movement of limb and muscle, and every night when he rolled himself in his blankets and stretched himself on his straw paillasse his body tingled with the luxury of physical weariness.

It was not till four or five months had passed that his mind, having at last thrown off its surfeit and grown empty as a sucked orange, began to revolt, and he longed to have a little time to himself in which to read and think. But that, in the life in barracks, was impossible. Throughout the twenty-four hours he was never alone. He tried for a few days to read *The Mayor of Casterbridge* at odd moments in the room which he shared with eleven other men, but he soon gave up the attempt, for the babel of talk never stopped from Réveillé to Lights-Out. It had not been difficult to suppress that little protest of the neglected mind, for during the last five years the mind had claimed more than its just share of his life.

In the spring of 1915 the authorities decided that, in the growing shortage of army officers, the men of certain battalions, including Christopher's, should be encouraged to take commissions. Christopher and his companions received the news with indignant despair. The breaking-up of their battalion seemed to them a betrayal of the terms on which they had joined up. But, none the less, the process began.

Man after man disappeared from the companies, and soon some of Christopher's own friends began to go. When at last two out of the three with whom he had joined up applied for commissions, Christopher unwillingly determined to do so too. He had no wish to be an officer, but he could not face the void left by his departing friends. Within a month of his application he was gazetted to a battalion which was drafting men and officers to France.

Then, once more, had begun for Christopher a new life. In place of the complete irresponsibility of the last ten months, his life was now filled with a series of responsibilities of a kind which he had never before known. He was confronted suddenly by a whole new order of life which it was his duty to master with all possible speed. The simplest part of it was the mechanism of infantry drill and general instruction, which, since it called for little more than sharp wits and precision, he acquired easily enough ; more difficult, because less mechanical, was the responsibility for his platoon, their conduct, their clothes, and their general behaviour ; and, most difficult of all and most fascinating, because it involved the incalculable human element, was the matter of discipline.

Christopher had already discovered, while still in the ranks, that there are two kinds of discipline—the discipline of fear and the discipline of love. The power which rank gave to an officer made it easy for all but the most abject to preserve discipline of a sort, and the slave-driver, by the discipline of fear, could produce a high degree of superficial obedience. But the only discipline which could ultimately be

depended upon was that which sprang from respect and affection.

In Christopher there was nothing of the martinet. He had a warm heart and an unbounded faith in human nature. He had always instinctively expected the best from all who crossed his path ; he had expected to like them and he had expected them to like him ; and now, as an officer, he always felt a secret shame when he was compelled to use against a fellow-man the arbitrary authority with which his rank invested him. Whenever he did so, he knew it for a sign that he had failed.

Nor was it always easy to succeed. A warm heart and a pleasant manner, though they did much, could not alone inspire devotion. An understanding of men, not only of men in the mass, but of the infinite varieties of the individual, was also needed, and a constant tact and discrimination in applying that understanding ; and more arduous than these was the final obligation to prove oneself worthy of devotion. For in the end it is only by standing on his own merits, unsupported by authority of any external prop, that a man can earn the respect and affection of other men. The easy laxities of the old civil life were useless here. Almost every day brought its tests, weighed him in the balance in the presence of his men, and the final test would come, as he already realised, when they reached the firing-line.

And so Christopher found that an arduous moral responsibility had been imposed upon him. But it did not oppress him : on the contrary, it gave a new zest to life. This change from the despondent sloth of the old life to the strenuous self-discipline of the

new was something in the nature of a religious conversion. He was glad now that he had moved forward from the simple obedience of the private soldier, for, though that life had at first seemed to satisfy him, it did so only by contrast with the evils of the life which had preceded it. Soon it would have grown stale, for it exercised only a half of his faculties. Now he had become both servant and master in one, for, though he had still to obey as absolutely as before, he had also to exact obedience. He was fascinated by the infinitely complicated task of controlling men. How dead his life among books had been compared with this rich, crowded life among men.

So the weeks had grown into months and the months climbed towards a year, and then overtopped it, and men and officers came and went, but Christopher's turn to go to France was not yet in sight. He raged at the delay. It was not that he longed for the Front with the thoughtless adventurousness of a boy : already before the war began he was past the age of youthful recklessness. But he felt, once more, that he had reached the end of a stage, that he was now fitted to do the thing that he had undertaken to do and was ready to set out ; and the continual sense of waiting on the edge of a future that was held in suspense produced in him a feeling of staleness and depression. He began to feel, once again, that he was unused. At last he could bear it no longer : by repeated applications he succeeded in getting his name moved forward on the list of officers for the Front. Now he would go out with the next draft.

Certain memories of that first year and of all the years of the war were more vivid for Christopher than much that happened after the Armistice, so deeply had the emotions, with which that new, exciting, and often changing life was charged bitten them into his mind. Even now to turn his thoughts casually to those times was to be caught back inescapably into the old emotions, the old moods, the eager, violent activities. The black marble toad was still in his hand. He laid it on the mantelpiece and returned to his desk.

For an hour he lost himself again in office work, writing several letters and finishing the drafting of a report which he took to old Templescombe to discuss with him. When the discussion was over it was lunch-time. Mr. Templescombe rose from his desk.

" Are you coming to the club ? " he asked.

Instantly Christopher felt that he must lunch alone. The bare thought of having to talk to Templescombe and other friends during and after lunch appalled him. More than ever he desired to think, to follow those long, apparently aimless, yet somehow orderly, streams of recollection which had flowed through his mind since his first early waking.

" No, not to-day," he said to Templescombe. " I'm not free for lunch. And, by the way," he added, by a sudden inspiration, " I should rather like to be away this afternoon. It's merely a little matter of private business and could be postponed, but there's nothing urgent here except a couple of letters which I'll write before I go, so if you don't mind signing them when Wilson has typed them——"

" Not at all, old man," said Templescombe. " Stay

away, by all means. I shall be here till four-thirty if anything turns up."

He went out with a smile and a nod, and Christopher returned to his own room. What a bright idea to have thought of taking an afternoon off. He felt immensely relieved, and, sitting down at his desk, he set about the two remaining letters. In a quarter of an hour they were finished. Then he flung himself back in his chair and stared again at the room.

It returned his stare insolently. The magic which Rosamund had brought to it on that distant day of her first visit had vanished now. The room enclosed him, brutally real, relentlessly familiar. It had no soul to-day, no unplumbed depth of mystery or mellow association : he knew it to its dregs and he hated it. Yet it was a beautiful room and there were beautiful things in it. They had been there ever since the first partners, Templescombe's grandfather and great-uncle, had set up business there ; perhaps even before that, for they had perhaps been taken over from the previous tenants. What a relief it would be, thought Christopher, to walk out of the place then and there and never return. It would be so simple. His disappearance would cause Templescombe only a trifling inconvenience. Pinson had all the details of the current business at his fingers'-ends, and in a week or two young Templescombe would be coming into the office. From a purely business point of view Templescombe might even be a little pleased, for he had taken Christopher into partnership when it was still doubtful if Ben would enter the business. All, then, that Christopher would have

to do would be to write him a letter of apology and explanation, and send certain brief instructions to his bank and his solicitor. Yes, the practical details were simple enough. The appalling, the insuperable difficulties lay in himself, in his hopeless inability to summon up the courage, the energy, and the ruthlessness.

And Rosamund ! The thought of her was like a knell tolled in his heart, the knell of everything—of love, manhood, and happiness if he stayed, of courage and energy if he tried to go. He closed his desk, took his keys out of his pocket, and then, pausing suddenly, changed his mind and put the keys back, leaving the desk unlocked. Then, with a last irresolute, uncomprehending look round the room, he went out.

CHAPTER XI

Rosamund, her mind set on the dinner-party, walked down Trevor Square, out of it at the south-east corner, and in less than a minute had crossed Brompton Road and vanished into Harrod's. Inside, she paused with a little sigh of pleasure. Which department should she visit first? For her the planning and ordering of a dinner was even more delightful than the party itself. There she stood, fumbling for her list in the little bag that hung by a silver chain from her wrist. All about her the various departments waited to receive her, offering their infinite variety of good things.

She would order the fish and meat first, because the ordering of them gave her the least pleasure: her delicate senses always shuddered at the smells of raw fish and raw meat. And so she began to make for the food section, threading her way through the great, airy halls with their tiled walls and pillars, and pausing sometimes to examine an evening frock, a festoon of grey silk shot with gold, or a painted vellum lampshade, aware all the time of an over-sweet perfume hanging in the still indoor air.

In the fish and butchery department, marble tables, some of them in two tiers, displayed the crude pinks and crimsons of raw steaks and chops and

every description of joint and fillet ; and along the further end of the room—fishes, black, white, silver, pale golden, iridescent, or spotted with rose or streaked with green—lay cool and wet upon cool grey marble. Soles and plaice, twisted scroll-like to display the curd-white underside, were disposed among the fantastic scarlet shapes of lobsters, and that scarlet was echoed in a softer tone by the pink ovals of sections of salmon. The orange of smoked haddocks was carefully contrasted with the tarnished bronze of kippers.

Rosamund, spying about fastidiously among these delicacies, decided suddenly that trout would be hopelessly out of place in her menu. The entrée was to be a certain concoction of sweetbreads, Ris de Veau à la Dubarry, on which she particularly prided herself : trout, immediately preceding it, would not provide a sufficient contrast. Indeed, now that she came to consider it, trout and sweetbread had a certain similarity of flavour and texture. Something much more pungent was needed. Lobster ! It was lobster, as a matter of fact, that she had first decided on : she had changed her mind on the spur of the moment when she had resolved to ring up Christopher. Well, the trout would have to go, even though it was Christopher's birthday. After all, the party itself was not so much a birthday party as an ordinary dinner-party. She would give Christopher trout some other night. What was wanted to-night was lobster fritters prepared in the Spanish manner, a dish which she had discovered in " Mrs. Beeton " under the title " Tortas de Langosta." So Rosamund selected and ordered two lobsters, and crossed over

to the butchery stalls, where she also made her selections and gave her orders.

Then she made her way to the fruit, flowers, and vegetables. She would dispose of the vegetables first. Cauliflowers ! She would want a cauliflower to go into the Ris de Veau à la Dubarry, and some asparagus for the soup, which was to be Purée d'Asperges.

When these and certain other things had been ordered, she was free to consider the fruit and flowers. About them she had decided nothing : it all depended on what flowers were to be had ; and now, as she entered the great tiled hall, she was confronted by a great bank of tulips. There were tulips of every shade : rose, lilac, grey, scarlet, orange, bronze, and pale sulphur yellow. Some yellow ones caught her fancy with narrow, pointed petals whose ends twisted and tapered like the limbs of a tiny octopus. A large central table was laden with pots containing rose-trees, red rambler roses both single and double ; and elsewhere she found the white pheasant-eye narcissus and Spanish irises both blue and yellow.

She crossed to the fruit-stalls. There were bananas, grape-fruit, some small round yellow melons, and some marbled green cantaloup melons, deeply grooved. There was a box of beautiful leaf-green apples, polished like marble, and each apple faultless. The idea came to Rosamund that she would arrange the table all in yellow and green, both flowers and fruit. She inspected the melons again. The green cantaloups were thirty shillings each : they were out of the question, a monstrous price. Even the small

yellow ones were twelve and six ; but she might perhaps get one of them and one or two grape-fruit, and then some bananas and some of the lovely leaf-green apples. All the fruit then would be yellow and green. She would arrange it in the green wedgwood dishes in the centre of the table ; and above it, in slim glass vases set like pillars among the green dishes, she would build a flowery roofage of yellow tulips. That was a brilliant idea, and original, too. Perhaps Lady Brawnton would remark upon it, and Rosamund, as she bent over the fruit, giving her orders to one of the girls in charge, heard Lady Brawnton's voice : " My dear, you really have the most wonderful taste. You must give me a hint or two for my parties."

Then she went over to the flowers and chose three large bunches of the yellow tulips. The green and yellow scheme would go beautifully, too, with her new frock, a lilac silk. She saw herself—her arms, neck, and face pale as a flower against the soft sheen of the silk, her blue eyes shining under her almost black hair and brows, forming, with the green and yellow of leaves and flowers and fruit at her elbow, a picture such as one sees at the Academy. But what about the drawing-room ?

Still with the lilac silk in mind, she chose some large rose-coloured tulips and a few grey ones. They would suit the particular blue of the drawing-room to perfection. She took all the flowers with her, so as to have plenty of time to arrange them during the afternoon.

When she reached home, the morning had gone and it was already lunch-time. It was amazing how

time flew when one was shopping. How delightful it would be, she reflected as she sat at her lunch, to be very rich ; to have, say, fifteen or twenty thousand a year. She would have a house in one of the larger and more select squares, Chester Square perhaps, with a large double drawing-room on the first floor. When they had guests the folding doors that divided the drawing-room would be opened, and she would move between one half of the room and the other, entertaining her friends. She would be famous, too, for her dinners and for her house-parties, for she would have a large house in the country also, with extensive grounds. Rosamund had always found the country rather dull, but to have large house-parties, to see one's guests wandering upon the terrace, in and out of the French windows, and among the trees on the lawns, would give one a pleasant sense of importance, and it would be nice to drive down from the town house to the country house in a Rolls-Royce. " It's really only a sort of week-end cottage," she heard herself saying, as she walked on the terrace with a newly arrived guest, a strikingly handsome man, a lord perhaps. And she, of course, would herself have a title. What would be a good one ? Lady Trevor ? Lady Knightsbridge ? Yes, Knightsbridge sounded rather well. " Lord and Lady Knightsbridge have returned to town for the season from . . . " From where ? What would be a good name for the country seat ? Not Something Castle or Something Court ; they were rather too obvious. No ; some curious double name would sound more distinguished. Burton Something. Burton Possett ! Yes, that had just the right tone. Burton Possett !

"Lord and Lady Knightsbridge returned to town yesterday from Burton Possett. Lady Knightsbridge is well known as a brilliant hostess. Her charming house in Chester Square will be the scene of more than one distinguished gathering in the course of the coming season."

Rosamund felt sure that a position of that sort would come quite natural to her. She had always somehow felt that she was a born aristocrat, though, as far as she had been able to discover, neither her father nor her mother nor any of her relatives had even a remote connection with the aristocracy. That, though she had never confessed it to anyone but herself, was a real grief to her when she allowed herself to realise it. More often, however, she ignored it, and adopted to herself the emotional attitude of one who, through adverse circumstances, had been reduced to comparatively humble life. In the little house in Trevor Square she often quite genuinely felt that she was stifling. She longed for large and numerous rooms. "I *must* have space," she had once said to Christopher when in a discontented mood. "These little pokey rooms and low ceilings are unendurable." She had made a gesture as if to thrust away the oppression of narrow and vulgar things, a gesture which, as she made it, reminded her suddenly of Mrs. Patrick Campbell in *Hedda Gabler.*

Christopher had smiled. "But, my dear Rosie," he had replied, "where did you acquire these palatial tastes? Why, the rooms at your father's are even pokier."

Of course the rooms were pokier in her own home: she had never denied it. That was one of the things

that were so irritating about Christopher ; he was always so literal and commonplace. Never any imagination. The memory of his reply made her flush a little now as she folded up her table-napkin, but as she rose from the table she remembered that Sir Edward and Lady Brawnton were coming to dinner to-night and at once all seemed well again.

Why was it, she wondered, that she always felt a real pleasure and excitement in the sound of a title ? " Sir Edward this ! " " Lady Brawnton that ! " The bandying about of the two names would impart to the evening a magic which it would otherwise lack. But she hoped that Sir Edward would not boast loudly, as he had done when she was calling at their house a month ago, that he was the son of a plumber " and proud of it." That had been really rather unnecessary. The strange thing had been that Lady Brawnton, who was evidently a lady by birth, had not seemed to be in the least embarrassed, though several people were present.

What, she wondered, would Christopher think of Sir Edward. You never could tell with Christopher. He was just as likely to like as to dislike the most vulgar or the most refined people ; but in either case he would be polite. Rosamund herself did not like Sir Edward : his jovial vulgarity was more than she could bear. But she liked Lady Brawnton, and unconsciously she imitated her in certain little gestures and modes of expression.

She cleared the table, turned back the tablecloth, and, bringing vases, a can of water, an old newspaper, and the bunches of tulips, she sat down to arrange them. She had always considered that she was

unrivalled in the art of arranging flowers, and now she set about constructing a sort of temple of yellow tulips for the dinner-table, an airy edifice supported on slim glass pillars from which the clustered green shafts of the stalks spread fanwise to support a fretted roof of yellow flowers. When at last it was finished, she carefully moved the vases to the side-board. Later, when the table was set for dinner and the vases in position, certain finishing touches would have to be made.

Then she arranged the rose-coloured tulips in two tall vases, and the pale ones in a third, deciding that she would put one vase of the rose-coloured ones on the table between the fireplace and the window, and the grey ones high up on the old bureau which stood, tall and dark, against the wall. By artificial light they would almost seem to be the shadow of the others. She wondered if any of the guests would appreciate that subtle suggestion. When these also were finished she carried them to the drawing-room and set each in its destined place, standing back to criticise the effect and then slightly moving one or other of them. At last they were absolutely right.

Yes, the effect was precisely what she had intended, and already the room was beginning to be fragrant with their sweet, faint scent. She returned to the dining-room to clear away the litter of leaves and stalks and one or two broken flowers, and seating herself listlessly at the dinner-table on the impulse of a sudden weariness, she put both elbows on it and propped her face in her hands.

Norman ! If only the tulips had been for Norman. She recalled how she used to take flowers to his flat

and arrange them for him, and how he would stand by her while she was doing so, interrupting her by suddenly clasping her in his arms or propping his chin on her shoulder and pressing his bristling cheek against hers. "Do stop, Norman," she used to say, pretending to be annoyed. "How can I do the flowers when you're behaving in this absurd way?"

That, as she knew well enough, always made his behaviour still worse. No, she would never love any man as she had loved him. The mere sight of him, the mere sound of his voice, with its vibrant male tone, thrilled her. It thrilled her even to touch the sleeve of his coat. And yet, to be with him had given her almost as much misery as happiness. More! Yes, certainly more! She had never been able to forget for long that he had loved other women, nor to rid her mind of the haunting suspicion that he was not always faithful to her. When she broke out and accused him, he had always reassured her gaily and carelessly, as one reassures a petulant child, leaving her with the feeling that he was keeping his own counsel and reserving to himself the right of complete freedom. All her weeping and raging produced, in the end, no effect.

That suspicion, never lulled for more than an hour or two, had become an unbearable torture. Yes, she had been right, absolutely right, to leave him: they would never have been happy together. And yet, she would never be happy without him. Ah, the smell of his tweed coat, the touch of his hands! She would never forget them, never drive them out of her blood. The mere memory of them

stirred in her, even now, an agony of hopeless longing. Yes, he had wrecked her life.

Once again she heard his careless, superior laugh, the laugh of a grown-up person tolerantly correcting a child : " Rosamund, you have been reading cheap novels." Devil ! Devil that he was ! Yes, he was a devil ; there was something positively evil in him. Yet she longed for him none the less, with his rough, masterly ways and his unexpected gusts of exquisite tenderness ; longed to have him wholly and inescapably hers. That and that alone would be perfect happiness.

His final devilry had been that, when she had left him after their quarrel over Miss Hetty, he had not attempted to reclaim her : he had not cared even when she had written and told him of her engagement to Christopher. " We were always bad for one another," he had written back, " and I am immensely relieved to know that you have now a prospect of permanent happiness. Brade is worth ten of me."

When she had received that letter she had burst into tears, had run to her bedroom and lain all afternoon on her bed, sobbing helplessly. Yes, he was right, Christopher was worth ten of him ; but it was him she longed for, and not Christopher. She turned her eyes now, half-expecting to see Christopher sitting on her left, for she herself was sitting in the place where she always sat for breakfast. And suddenly the memory of the quarrel at the breakfast-table that morning leapt back into her mind. How dared he ? How dared he turn on her like that ?

Again her thoughts and feelings broke into a devil-dance, leaping and cowering in incoherent rage. How brutal and cowardly men were ! Suddenly all her doubts returned. How, after all, did she know he would return to-night ? When he spoke to her on the telephone, he had spoken as if he had every intention of returning ; but then, how else would he have replied if he had been determined not to return ? He would certainly have led her to suppose that he was returning in either case. She remembered how coldly he had answered her at first, and it seemed to her now that when his voice had softened a little she had noticed something unconvincing, something artificial in its tone. The alteration had been a little too deliberate.

All her fears, all her harassing uncertainties, rushed back to torment her. Without even thinking what she was going to say to him, or if he would be back from lunch, she hurried into the hall and again rang up the office. Pinson's voice answered her :

" Mr. Brade, madam ? He's gone, madam. He won't be in again to-day."

Gone ! So it was true. The worst was true. He had been lying to her when he had led her to suppose that he was coming home to dinner. All her pleasure in the preparations for the party was ruined.

CHAPTER XII

Christopher, having left the office, turned east and passed from Lincoln's Inn Fields into the Inn itself, making his way through square and court and passage to the dark gate that leads into Chancery Lane. He crossed the street, and, cutting down the shady channel of Bream's Buildings, reached Fetter Lane and disappeared into the narrow tunnel of Nevill's Court, where two can hardly walk abreast. He passed the little greengrocer's shop on the left, and through a half-open door in the blackened wall that bounded the right side of the passage he caught a glimpse of the stately old house—so strangely engulfed in those sordid surroundings—in which Keir Hardie used to have a bedroom and sitting-room.

He had decided to lunch in Ludgate Circus. He knew of a wine-shop there in a vault under the railway viaduct over which, for passengers on the tops of buses which descend Fleet Street eastwards, towers the noble mass of St. Paul's. That wine-shop had been a favourite haunt of his in earlier days. There was little chance of his meeting anyone he knew there, and at this late hour he would probably find a vacant table in a quiet corner. He resolved that he would have a bottle of wine with his lunch to cheer him up.

Before crossing Ludgate Circus from the end of Fleet Street to the beginning of Ludgate Hill, he bought a copy of *The Star* to provide a screen for his loneliness during lunch. A train thundered over the viaduct as he entered the dark doorway beneath it. Among the huge wine-barrels in the first room, each with its label and the little tin bucket under the tap to catch the drippings, a few men stood or sat talking over glasses of wine. Christopher passed on down the steps to the second of the two rooms below. It was not more than half full, and as he had hoped, he found a small table in the far corner unoccupied.

He sat down and ordered a welsh rabbit, and, feeling that a little self-indulgence was permissible on his birthday, half a bottle of a vintage port ; and, having done so, he settled down to read his paper. He became aware that he was very hungry, and as soon as his half-bottle of port arrived he poured out a glass and began to sip it. It was extraordinarily good. It had that delicious dryness and the faint flavour of cedar-wood which are to be found only in an old vintage port.

He read his paper and sipped his wine for what seemed an age before the welsh rabbit arrived. At last the waiter appeared at the door with it, gazed for a moment round the room as if trying to remember who had ordered it, and then, catching Christopher's eye, hurried up to his table. Christopher fell upon it ravenously, and for some minutes his troubles receded from him and he was aware of nothing but the profound satisfaction of easing a sharp hunger and an epicurean delight in the biting,

savoury flavour of the cheese and the crispness of the toast. He carefully reserved an edge of the square to the last, where the flame had caught the cheese and burnt it to a crisp, golden foam. How sad that it would so soon be finished. Four moderate mouthfuls, each with a dab of mustard, a pause before the final one, and Christopher was gazing sadly at an empty plate.

Should he order another? No. Though he could easily eat another, his desire for thought was now more urgent than his desire for food. He would sit and dream now, slowly sipping his port, of which he had not yet finished the first glass. He filled up the half-empty glass, and as he did so a delicious, rosy fragrance floated up from the troubled surface of the wine. Inside the clear globe of crimson, on its slender stem, shone a core of burning ruby. He heaved a sigh of relief. Now that the body was appeased, he could appease the unaccountable longing to review his past life.

What point had he reached before leaving the office? The war: all that period of the war before he went to France.

France! As long as he lived, the word would have a strange, exciting, tragic significance for him.

The great discovery that France had brought to Christopher was the discovery of himself. He had discovered, with immense relief and satisfaction, that he was brave; that he could rely upon himself to keep his head in every conceivable eventuality short of mutilation or death. The obligation to show an example of courage was always enough to produce the courage needed.

He recalled the first occasion on which he had come under machine-gun fire. The battalion had been told off to dig a new line of trench in close support to the front line. They had arrived at the appointed place and begun work at dusk. The men had been extended along the line of their work and an officer put in charge of every twenty or thirty yards. It was a grey, rainy evening, the light was slowly fading, and before long Christopher had lost sight of the officers on his right and left. From time to time, across the earth-deadened sounds of pick and shovel, the distant stuttering of a machine-gun, or the still more remote thud of some heavy explosion, betrayed distances long since grown invisible. Then, in a wave of rapidly augmenting and rapidly diminishing sound, came the rattle of a much nearer machine-gun, and it seemed that a shower of pebbles were spattered over the ground round about him. The digging men skipped into the half-dug trench and crouched down, and Christopher realised that a German machine-gun was spraying their trench-line. Again came that ominous stuttering, suddenly louder and suddenly softer again. Christopher did not know whether an officer took cover on such occasions or not ; there was no other officer in sight ; and so, rather than appear to be afraid, he had continued his slow walk up and down the section of trench of which he was in charge.

How easily, he reflected now, sitting before his glass of port, that traversing machine-gun might have picked him off. For mere foolish pride, a kind of inverted cowardice, the fear of appearing afraid,

he had deliberately risked his life, and risked, besides, the infliction on his mother of a life-long sorrow.

But was it, after all, a foolish pride? Was it not rather a supremely valuable quality, the quality which had made him and so many of his companions successful leaders of men; the power of ignoring danger when it was necessary to ignore it? It was his mother who had made him what he was; she took her risk as he took his; and he felt now that even if on that occasion he had uselessly thrown away his life, all would, in some profound and ultimate sense, have been well with himself and her.

He recalled how, when waiting for zero hour or crouching in a trench under a heavy bombardment, he had always been aware of an unassailable centre in himself, a bedrock of confidence which nothing could shake. It was not that he was fearless: fears and anxieties had assailed him often, but he had never felt that they were going to get the better of him. His centre of courage was proof against them. In the old peace-time life in which he had come to feel himself so useless it had been believed that modern man was a degenerate creature incapable of the courage and endurance of his forebears. The war had given the lie to that. The modern man had proved himself at least the equal of the ancient hero: the romantic fiction had been exploded.

It was a source of profound satisfaction to Christopher that, at a time when his belief in himself and in life was beginning to flag, life had laid hold of

him and tested him to the uttermost and that he had not been found wanting. For him, the war, despite its experiences of horror and terror—experiences which he would not have missed for the world and which he would rather die than undergo again—had been supremely worth while. He knew that he would never again despair of life.

And yet now, caught in this cleft stick of love and hatred, was he not once again despairing of life? The years of his maturity had been a lamentable decline from the magnificent prelude of the war. He raised his wineglass to his lips, drank off its contents, and poured out what remained in the bottle. The wine he had swallowed sent warm tributaries tingling through his body. After so light a lunch it had, as he had hoped, gone a little to his head. A rosy recklessness began to spread mistily through his mind, a glow of courage. But it was Dutch courage, no more than a pale mimicry of the mood in which, six months after the Armistice, he returned from France.

He had returned with the sense that all life lay at his feet. He had felt himself fit for anything. It only remained for him to decide which of all the trades and professions that the world offered he should adopt. Meanwhile he had gone home to spend a few weeks with his mother.

As the days passed and he began to realise that he was once again a civilian, his feelings underwent a change. He discovered that on the day when he had laid aside his uniform he had become insignificant. There was no longer anyone in the world to whom

his word was law. Quite suddenly he had been robbed of all authority: he was nobody now, an undistinguished unit among thousands of civilians.

And it was not only the position of a ruler of men that he missed. Still more he missed his company, the great family of men to whom he had for so long stood almost in the position of a father. He felt lamentably unoccupied and alone. The great noisy, busy crowd of men in which he had lived for the last four years had suddenly deserted him and vanished utterly, and he was only now beginning to understand that they had vanished for ever. For the first time he realised how he had loved them all and how closely his life was bound up with theirs.

But in other respects this new civilian life was a blessed change from the years of the war. To sit with his mother in the old garden, secure in the knowledge that there would be no more good-byes, no return to the Front in a few days' time; to know that the haunting anxieties of the last four years had been lifted from her mind; to tell himself that there would be no more casualties, no more shelling, no more "going over the top," no more sleepless nights in the mud and rain and black darkness—seemed a thing too marvellous to be true.

And what a luxury, after the hard, sordid army life, to feel soft carpets underfoot, to sleep in clean white linen, to bathe every morning in a snow-white bath with shining taps, to use silver forks and spoons and spotless table-linen once again, to contemplate

an endless variety of tempting dishes for breakfast, lunch, and dinner instead of the sickening routine of army food ; all these refinements, which had once been so much a matter of course that they had been hardly noticeable, were now a continual delight to him.

So a month passed and it was time to begin to look out for a job. It became evident at once that there were very few jobs to be had. The land fit for heroes, of which Lloyd George and the Press had had so much to say, proved to be a land in which many of the heroes found it impossible to obtain a livelihood. There was not much good coming home with the feeling that you were fit for everything when there was nothing for you to do.

Eventually Christopher and his mother agreed that he should return to London and take up his free-lance work again. He had saved enough out of his army pay and gratuity to keep him for a year in London independent of what he might earn.

He had recalled, as if it were a distant dream, the gradual disillusionment and despair which had descended upon his life in London before the war. Now he faced the prospect of taking it up again without misgiving. For now he was changed : he felt only a vague connection with the ineffectual young man whose confidence in himself and his work had broken down before the war came to his rescue. Now he was full of self-confidence and energy : the intellectual side of him which, before, had been stunned by over-work, was now fresh and eager after the four years' rest, and hungry for employment.

In the old days he had been singularly immature for his years ; he had been ignorant of himself, vague and fluctuating in thought and in his outlook on life. Now his mind had focused itself : it had gained strength and sanity. The habitual nearness of death during these years had set life, for him, in a saner perspective. It had become simpler, and at the same time more profound. No, he would never again despair of life.

How strange that he should have brought that conviction back from the universal wreckage of the war. The divine assurance of it flooded his mind with warmth, spread a glow of well-being through his body ; and as he sat now, deep in thought, before his empty bottle and his half-empty glass of wine, he heaved a deep sigh of relief.

And then, suddenly, as the falling of a curtain at the end of the play, the life which a moment ago he had been living so intensely fell away from him and dissolved like a dream, and the present, with all its heartache, rushed back upon him.

If only he could go back to that mood of freshness and energy in which he had resumed civil life and take up life once more at that point. What a different life he would make for himself. But such desires were absurd. To undo the past and return to a backward point in time would be to undo also the experience of life with Rosamund, and without that to warn him he would certainly have been enchanted once more, as he had previously been enchanted, when the destined moment brought him the first sight of her.

He roused himself impatiently. This refusal to

accept the accomplished fact, this dream of going back and making a new start, was only another symptom of cowardice in the presence of the future. But it is one thing to be aware of cowardice and another to have the power to shake it off. What paralysed Christopher was the necessity of making a decision, of assuming responsibility for a self-directed action. If only some superior being would dictate to him the saving course, he would follow it cheerfully, however difficult and dangerous. It had been the same during the war. Physical action was simple. It was always easy to perform a clearly defined and vitally necessary act, however great the danger. The difficult things were the vague things, the things which required deliberation and the weighing of dubious alternatives. Yet in the present case Christopher knew that almost any action would be beneficial, that the one fatal thing was to do what he was doing now, to drift.

Yes, he was drifting ; and he felt that he was destined to drift on helplessly, crippled by this inescapable love which split all his initiative, all his decision, all his physical and mental energies, in two. He was the house divided against itself. All his energies were consumed in fighting against himself : none were left over to grasp life in strong hands and remodel it in a new and coherent form.

Raising his eyes, he saw that all the tables were empty. Not a soul remained in the room except the waiter, who stood in the open doorway watching him. Catching Christopher's eye, he

came up to him. "Sorry, sir," he said, "but it's time."

Christopher glanced at the clock. It was three o'clock. He drained his wineglass, paid his bill, and went out into the roar and movement and dazzle of Ludgate Circus.

CHAPTER XIII

Christopher climbed on to a bus going to London Bridge. What a relief it was not to be going back to the office. He was free for the whole afternoon, free to fritter away the minutes and hours in whatever way seemed good to him. He made no plan. When the bus deposited him at London Bridge Station he would choose another and go somewhere else. There are few better places for reflection on a fine May afternoon than a front seat on the top of a bus : the flowing of the external world of traffic and houses and lamp-posts induces a sympathetic stream in the world within.

The great mass of St. Paul's loomed threateningly towards him as, with the roar of the labouring engine, the bus climbed Ludgate Hill, but before it had reached the top and halted near the steps of the great portico, Christopher had lost consciousness of the outer world. He was back in that other London, the London to which he had returned nine years ago from France.

In what a different spirit he had resumed his old work. When he had first come up to London four years before the war, he had approached journalism anxiously and diffidently, and as work came his way he had given himself up to it, body and soul, until he had become a mere drudge beneath the tyranny of it.

How painstaking and conscientious he had been, and yet he had made no more than a bare subsistence out of it. But when he had returned to it after the war, he had returned as a man transformed. He no longer felt any doubt of his capacity to deal with the books that came his way. He took his work, indeed, much less seriously than before : that was undeniable. But was that necessarily reprehensible ? Was it not, after all, possible to take it too seriously ? To expend an immense amount of energy on work which was intended for ephemeral periodicals, which no one would read more than once and the majority not at all, was not virtuous, but merely wasteful. It showed a lack of proportion and a distorted idea of the job he had undertaken. It was giving more than was expected of him, more even than was desired of him, and more than the majority of readers was capable of assimilating. And, besides this, it was imposing upon himself a burden, which, if he was to make a living out of his work, was more than he could bear. It was not fair to himself. The reviewer of books was assumed to be a person with an intelligence above the average and an artistic capacity which made his writing worth reading ; he was, in fact, a specialist, and the simple expression of his opinion on a book was therefore of value to the common reader.

That, in Christopher's maturer view, was the proper way to regard his job. It was a job in which it was very easy for one habitually conscientious to be over-conscientious. If he squandered too much labour on a review, he would merely be providing something which the common reader neither

desired nor appreciated. And, in any case, Christopher in his new, self-confident mood was not going to allow himself to be enslaved. The labourer was worthy of his hire ; therefore the labour must be proportioned to the hire. Besides, journalism was his trade, not his religion. It was his means of providing himself with the wherewithal to live his own life, and his own life was of more importance than books and papers.

That had been Christopher's post-war attitude to the work which in earlier days had almost crushed the life out of him, and the result of it had been that he began to make, without difficulty, at least twice the income he had made before. But there was another change in his attitude towards writing. Before the war he had taken up journalism as a step towards literature. His ambition had been to become a writer of books, not only of criticism and essays, but also of stories and novels. But the ambition to become a writer of fiction had remained no more than an ambition. When he had got to the point of considering his material he had always been faced by the disquieting discovery that he had nothing to write about. Was it merely that he lacked experience of life, or could it be that he was without the capacity to use experience ? Surely it could not be that ? He was vaguely but strongly aware of artistic powers in himself which were only awaiting the material for their proper expression. But how did a man acquire experience ? Didn't the man who had it in him to write gather material from whatever lay ready to hand ? Jane Austen had made exquisite works of art out of the most limited of lives. Could it be, he used

to ask himself with a sinking heart, that he was crying for the moon, that this craze of his to become a writer was merely an idle fad with no justification ?

Looking back after the war on those early ambitions, Christopher had seen clearly that those fears had been only too real, for he believed now that his longing to write fiction had been nothing more than a sign of his dissatisfaction with life as he found it, an impotent wish to create, even though only in words and phrases, a life which should come nearer to the desire of his heart. For now, returning fresh from four years of crowded and active life, a life crammed with events and new and thrilling experiences, he found that his desire to turn author, so far from being reinforced by the rich experience he had acquired, had vanished. He wanted, now, to live ; not to write. Writing had become for him no more than a trade.

At first all had gone well. Though at rare moments he felt a little solitary and aimless and very unimportant after his experience as an officer, life was fairly full. During the last four years life had been so relentlessly practical and useful and so strictly ordered that it was a relief for a while to idle and drift and to realise with amazement that his time was at his own disposal. He had joined a club, so that he avoided to a large extent the solitary meals which had depressed him so much before the war, and, as he found it much easier now to make new friends, he received many invitations, both formal and informal, for the evenings. It was not till after many months of this new life that the old spectres of uselessness and futility began to haunt him again,

and again he began to ask himself the fatal questions : What is it all for ? Where is it all leading ?

Then once more the old restlessness and the old unhappiness returned, and he awoke each morning with a lead-weight at his heart. Mr. Templescombe, who had been a friend of his father, offered to take him into his office ; but Christopher, though he did not think it unlikely that he would be able to pick up the work, feared that the sense of futility and those disturbing and obstinate questions would pursue him into a job in which his chief interest, as in his present one, would be mercenary. He hesitated, and asked for time to consider his reply, and meanwhile, in desperation, he began to enquire into the possibilities of emigration to Canada or Australia. An open-air life, with plenty of manual work, was what, he felt, would suit him best.

It was by this time nine or ten months after his return from France. It had seemed to Christopher more like ten years. The war and the army life seemed to have receded far into the past : already they were assuming in his mind the aspect of a wonderful and terrible dream. He longed sometimes to drop back for a brief spell into that crowded, strenuous, and friendly life. But it was gone, irrecoverably gone : only twice had he recaptured a brief glimpse of it—at a battalion reunion held a year after the Armistice and an officers' dinner a few months later. There was nothing nowadays to fill his life as it had been filled during the war. Once more he was alone.

And then, in early April of 1920, the Milvaines had invited him to stay for the week-end. The Milvaines lived on the south coast about a mile from

the sea. Their home, an old red house set on a hillside, looked down over meadows and marshland to a great segment of sea. It was a delicious spot. Everywhere there was a sense of wide spaces and clean, sea-scented air.

As Christopher sat dreaming of the Milvaines, he felt a cool air brush his cheek ; he seemed to be high up in the air ; air flowed over him as he slid along. Raising his eyes and looking in bewilderment about him, he saw a gull swing up from below and describe a wide arc over his head. The bus was crossing London Bridge. Downstream, its turrets blue with distance, the Tower Bridge barred the river. As the bus approached the southern side Christopher looked down on the usual crowd of idlers leaning over the parapet and watching the loading of a steamer moored to the quay almost under the bridge, and for a moment he thrilled, as perhaps that crowd of onlookers thrilled too, at the sight of a ship soon to cast off, to thrust itself from the bank, swing out into the fairway, and then, leaving even the river and its banks, strike forward into the open sea, flinging behind it the land and all the troubles, complexities, and ties of landbound men. If he could only sign on as a member of the crew and set out, without so much as asking whither the ship was bound, for the new and the unknown. Then life would become an adventure once more. Then perhaps, in the crowd and the noise and the hard work, in the absence of all familiar things, in the continuous unfolding of a new, unpredictable life to his wondering eyes, he would break, strand by strand, the rope which held him to Rosamund, till

at last he was free and whole-hearted and fit for life again. Now the bus was climbing the slope to London Bridge Station : it stopped in the station yard and Christopher got down.

He crossed to the station entrance, and stood for a while studying the boards which announce the destinations and departure-hours of the trains. His mind, vibrating to the touch of familiar associations, sang faintly of the delights of travel and holidays and escape from drudgery. But Christopher, the conscious Christopher, hardly heard it. With a sigh, he turned away, and, after inspecting the buses drawn up in the station yard, he boarded one which was going in the direction of his club. He had suddenly realised that he was tired and longed for a deep chair and a quiet room.

It must have been from London Bridge that he had started, on that Saturday eight years ago, for his week-end with the Milvaines, a day which had proved as significant in his life as that day in the autumn of 1914 when he had gone to the recruiting-office with his three friends. But when he had taken his ticket at London Bridge he had had no idea of the immense importance of his act : indeed, when he had received Mrs. Milvaine's invitation he had at first written a refusal, feeling at the moment unable to face the Milvaines' particular sort of week-end. But when he had read through his refusal he had torn it up and written an acceptance instead, reminding himself that he was very apt to dislike in prospect what in fact turned out to be very enjoyable, and that he generally woke up on Saturday mornings in an adventurous and adaptable mood.

How amazing now to reflect that the whole thing had been so much a matter of touch-and-go. He might so easily have posted his refusal. And if he had done so, where would he have been, what sort of a life would he have been living now? Was life really a matter of chance or was it bound by iron rules? Had it been laid down in the beginning of things, when the vast, complicated machine was set going, that he should inevitably tear up that refusal, as it is certainly laid down by unalterable laws that when a certain wind, diverted from its course by a certain wall, strikes a certain dead leaf, that leaf shall whirl upwards, describe certain ordained curves, and flutter down to a strictly appointed spot of earth, all with an absolute, mathematical precision? It was a chilling thought. The cynical inhumanity of such a scheme reduces man, with all his loves and ambitions, all his high achievements, noble self-sacrifices, his tragedies and sorrows, even his relentless cruelties and monstrous wickednesses, to a thing more futile and ridiculous than a performing flea.

At the bottom of the slope that descends from the station yard the bus turned to the left, and Christopher had a fleeting glimpse of the roofs and tower of Southwark Cathedral on his right. Southwark Cathedral, he reflected, was one of the hundreds of monuments set up in London to commemorate man's revolt against the theory of a deterministic universe. Yet what, he asked himself wearily, did it all matter? It was impossible at man's present stage of knowledge to solve the dilemma. The data for proof were not accessible to him, and, even if they were, they

would be beyond his scope. The only thing that did matter was man's attitude to the life he was living. The man healthy in mind and body found a zest in life and living which made those remote and cloudy questions appear unreal and almost academic. Even now, in his stagnation and unhappiness, Christopher was aware of that zest, that absorption in life in the living. He felt it as an inner urge, driving, driving . . . driving him towards what? "Lay hold on life," said the hymn; an admirable phrase when detached from its context and from the meaning intended by its writer. Yes, that zest urged him to lay hold on life and to shake off the living death which was his present condition.

Why had he boarded this bus and set off again for home? Though he had taken that other bus in Ludgate Circus after lunch with no other conscious idea than to have a ride, had he not perhaps unconsciously, in obedience to some hidden impulse, been making a vague, fumbling attempt to escape? If not, why had he chosen a bus which was going to London Bridge, when there were countless other directions he might have chosen? He had crossed the river, as if by that to symbolise his abandonment of the London he knew, and had landed himself at a railway station as if in the hope that the stubborn, sluggish creature which was his conscious self would be spurred by the sight of a station and a booking-office into a definite action. Perhaps, if he were still a Christian, he would have taken that crossing of the river as a sign that Saint Christopher, his patron saint, was guiding him, for Saint Christopher was the patron saint of ferrymen. But such

fancies were absurd, for they could always be made to justify any occasion. The bus on which he now sat, having followed Southwark Street and turned to the right, was climbing the slope towards Southwark Bridge. He might, quite justifiably argue that Saint Christopher was guiding him home to Rosamund and was now, in fact, ferrying him back to the north bank. For they had reached Southwark Bridge now and were crossing it, and in front of them, on the left, Saint Paul's rode superbly above the line of warehouses and wharves that wall the river. But Christopher, his mind dazed by the curious fancies he had been pursuing, felt himself a renegade crawling ignominiously back to the old contemptible life.

Yet who could ever tell whether it was better to go forward or to turn back? He had gone forward on that Saturday eight years ago when the Milvaines had invited him down for the week-end, and as an immediate consequence here he was writhing helplessly in a cleft stick.

Funny little Mrs. Milvaine, so ridiculous and yet so lovable. Mrs. Milvaine had been devoted to the arts and to everything and everybody however remotely connected with them. It would have been the easiest thing in the world to pull her leg, since she had little or no discrimination and not much intelligence. But she was eager, intensely eager, to appreciate and understand, and so she squandered on good and bad alike a vast amount of anxious and puzzled enthusiasm. She was always discovering new musicians and painters and poets, whom she overwhelmed with admiration and more material kindnesses. And

so you never knew, when you went down for the week-end, whether you would find among the guests a really fine pianist or some pale, long-haired young man with a gift for third-rate improvisation. " And isn't it extraordinary," little Mrs. Milvaine would say of him ; " it all comes to him as soon as he closes his eyes. He can't play at all with his eyes open. It's psychic, of course."

Old Milvaine—kindly, sensible, imperturbable, —good-humouredly tolerated the enthusiasm that seethed about him. His belief in his wife was unshakable, and he was frequently to be detected gazing at her in proud admiration as she chattered vaguely, volubly, and with the bated breath of ecstasy, about Stravinski and Picasso and Gertrude Stein. " Most of it's Double Dutch to me," he would murmur into the ear of anyone who seemed likely to sympathise, " but *she* knows all about it. You can't stump her when it's a question of the arts." And in another part of the drawing-room little Mrs. Milvaine's voice would be heard : " But I do feel, you know, when I read it over and over several times, that something, I don't quite know how to put it, a certain *effect* begins to—er—to emerge ; what I might call a sort of—er—of *incantation*. Oh, yes, I know, I know : I fully admit it's all nonsense on the *surface* : but I do feel, you know, my dear, that one must take pains—just, as it were—er—surrender oneself, set aside one's—er—— " And, uttering these vague phrases, little Mrs. Milvaine would fix on her companion the eager, earnest, and innocent gaze of a child, so that one felt that, at all costs, in defiance of one's artistic principles, in defiance even of truth

itself, she must be protected from disillusionment and ridicule.

When Christopher had arrived on that Saturday eight years ago, he had found there, as the other guests, a young artist and his wife ; Elizabeth Relton the poetess, a thin, middle-aged spinster with a quiet wisdom of speech ; an old gentleman who, Mrs. Milvaine at once informed him, had written such an interesting book on Greek vases ; and a beautiful, slim, pale, dark-haired young woman, a Miss Vernon.

He had arrived just in time for tea, and as soon as tea was over Mrs. Milvaine had appropriated him, carrying him off to show him the gardens. She had chattered all the while of books and plays, interrupting herself frequently to point out some new variety of daffodil or the grape hyacinths that spread pools of blue in the long grass among the budding trees. " Aren't they lovely ? " she had said, with the familiar little catch in her voice which seemed always to come from the bated breath of ecstasy, and her transparent, childlike glance had invited him to share her delight. Poor little Mrs. Milvaine. She had died suddenly, two years ago, and he and Rosamund had found, when the news came, a moment of reconciliation in their mutual sorrow.

At the memory of it and at the return of his thoughts to the present, Christopher felt his heart shrivel ; for, absorbed in those recollections of eight years ago, he had felt again the stirrings of the old ecstasy. Now he took refuge in them again and recalled how, when he and Mrs. Milvaine had strolled back towards the house, the beautiful Miss

Vernon had appeared at a side door which opened on to the croquet-lawn, and, catching sight of them, had come to meet them across the grass.

She had seemed then to Christopher even more beautiful than he had at first supposed. Her face had a look of quiet self-absorption, as though she were dreaming of some peaceful, melancholy secret of her own, and she walked with a supple but rather languid movement of limbs and body which was without a trace of self-consciousness. Christopher, standing there beside little Mrs. Milvaine, had felt the pulsing and flickering of a sudden excitement as the beautiful young woman drew near and, raising dark blue eyes under dark brows, smiled at them. " I felt it was too fine to stay indoors," she had said to Mrs. Milvaine ; and Mrs. Milvaine had replied, " Yes, it's wonderful, isn't it ? " with the little catch in her breath on the word wonderful. " I really think," she had added, " that I ought to go and bring the others out. Christopher, I shall leave you to show Miss Vernon the flowers."

She had gone busily off towards the front door, and Christopher, with a thrill that had brought the colour to his cheeks, had found himself alone for the first time with Rosamund.

She had met his eyes with quiet self-possession, as if expecting him to speak, and then, when he still hesitated, she had begun to move down the path. " Is this the way we go ? " she had said in her low voice, and Christopher had felt in that voice and in all her quiet self-possessed manner something sane and secure, something at the opposite pole from little Mrs. Milvaine's indiscriminate ecstasies. But beneath

that sanity and security there were depths of which, now and then, in a tone of her voice or a certain intensity in her straight glance he caught fleeting intimations. He felt himself noisy and superficial beside this hushed, coolly intense creature of whose presence at his side he was so thrillingly aware.

"Mrs. Milvaine didn't tell me," she had said with a smile, as they paced down the long gravel path, "what your particular qualification was."

"Qualification? For showing you the flowers?" he had asked, smiling back at her.

"No, for being here at all."

Christopher had knitted his brows. He had felt that he was being ridiculously obtuse.

"Your artistic qualification," Rosamund had explained, with a stress on the second word.

"Oh, I see. Oh, I review books." How schoolboyish and stupid he had sounded to himself. "And what about yours?" he had added, in an attempt to assume something of her easy detachment.

"I have none," she had answered. "I am here on false pretences."

"Or simply, perhaps, to be——" Christopher had hesitated. He had been going to say "ornamental," but it had suddenly occurred to him that she would think that he was clumsily trying to make polite speeches.

"To be——?" Rosamund had looked at him, raising a questioning eyebrow.

"To be normal," said Christopher, "among all the freaks."

"Normal!" She made a little helpless gesture. "I only wish——" She broke off short, as if some hidden thought had made her forget to complete the sentence.

That broken reply had left with Christopher the sense of a secret tragedy; but, recalling the incident now, he smiled grimly, for he knew that to be considered merely normal was what Rosamund especially hated. She regarded herself, and she wished others to regard her, as a creature of intense feelings and dark passions, a woman with that interesting and romantic commodity, a broken heart.

Poor Rosamund. He had no sooner sneered at her in thought then he reproached himself, for there could be no doubt that, beneath the romantic adornments in which she clothed her sorrows, the sorrows themselves were real enough. They were the sorrows of the woman who cannot escape from herself, who always demands more than she is willing to give. Picturing her now as she then was, his heart melted, for even though he knew that those qualities, or seeming qualities, which had enchanted him at their first meeting—the sanity, the calm self-possession—were hardly more than skin-deep, her beauty was real enough, and its spell was still upon him and upon her, whenever he turned his eyes to her face.

Perhaps if he were to see her now for the first time he would not feel the smallest thrill, would not even pause to look round if he were to pass her on the road. But he could not regard her with that detached observation. For him, the raptures and

miseries of eight years threw their lights and shadows across the mask of to-day, making it beautiful and heart-rendingly desirable. How easy and friendly their talk had been as they walked among Mrs. Milvaine's daffodils. And it was serious talk : she did not expect, as so many young women did, the gay banter of casual flirtation. They had walked about the grounds for nearly an hour, and once, when they had heard the voices of the others approaching them on the other side of a yew hedge, they had simultaneously turned round with a glance of mutual understanding and had walked away in the opposite direction.

When at last they had strolled back to the house together, Elizabeth Relton was standing at the front-door, and Christopher remembered that her eyes had greeted them fondly and wistfully, as if across a wide gulf of years. At dinner they had been separated, for Christopher had the artist's wife on his right and Miss Relton on his left, and Rosamund was on the other side of the table, between the artist and the Greek vase man. His eyes sought hers through the screen of slim, yellow narcissi, but the gold dust of the candlelight blurred his perception of her and withdrew her far from him.

As for her, she did not seem to be aware of his presence across the flowers. Perhaps, he had thought with a twinge of pain, the bond of which he had been so glowingly conscious ever since their hour together in the garden did not exist for her. Sometimes she turned her eyes slowly to the young artist on her left and smiled in reply to something he had said, and Christopher felt a little viper of jealousy

twist in his heart. The dinner had seemed interminably long. Even the talk of Elizabeth Relton on his left, so wise, so humorous, and so richly human, had not beguiled his impatience for more than a few minutes.

Old Milvaine had always insisted on an extra half hour of port and talk for the gentlemen, and when at last they joined the ladies Christopher, casting a rapid and anxious glance round the drawing-room, had found that Mrs. Milvaine and the artist's wife were the only women there. One of the French windows was open. In the warm compactness of the lamplit drawing-room, it looked like the mouth of a huge cavern within which loomed the vague profundities of the almost invisible garden. "The others are on the terrace," said Mrs. Milvaine. "There's such a wonderful moon and it's as warm as midsummer."

Everyone drifted towards the open window, and there was talk of taking a turn on the terrace. The artist's wife, hugging herself in a scarlet silk shawl like a frail little marionette, declared that she preferred the fire ; the old gentleman of the Greek vases agreed with her ; and the rest stepped out into the moonlight.

All the black shapes of the garden—the trees, the walls, the sundial, the garden-seats—were pied and barred and chequered with the cold phosphorescence of the moonlight ; mists of tarnished silver hung between the trees, and in the distance the sea, shot with a sheen of silver, was seen with telescopic clearness. Christopher glanced along the terrace. Half-way down its length two dark figures that

sometimes merged into one were retreating at a leisurely stroll. Mrs. Milvaine took possession of the young artist, and Christopher and old Milvaine and his cigar were left together.

Christopher liked old Milvaine. He welcomed his presence at the Milvaine week-ends as a refuge of plain common sense in the welter of vague æstheticism ; but now he wished him miles away, for if he had been alone he might have found it possible to link himself on to Rosamund and Miss Relton as they passed the drawing-room windows. But there was nothing for it now but to accompany the old man along the terrace and to try to attend to what he had to say.

Now the figures of Mrs. Milvaine and the young artist had eclipsed the others, but in a moment the others had detached themselves and were coming towards him. Rosamund was on the right : it would be she and not Miss Relton who passed him. His heart leapt as the two women loomed nearer, and as they passed him he actually broke off in the middle of some reply he was making to a question of old Milvaine's. But Rosamund had been deep in talk with Miss Relton : she had not so much as noticed him.

Christopher pulled himself together. Good Lord ! He was making a fool of himself over this girl. She was beautiful, certainly ; but this feverish preoccupation with her to the exclusion of everything else was absurd.

And not only absurd, but fatal to his peace of mind during the next eight years, he thought to himself now, as the houses of the Strand broke off and

Charing Cross Station rose on the left above its yard, busy with porters and taxis, and on the right children were shouting and throwing balls in the railed space at the east end of Saint Martin's in the Fields. He was holding something carefully between the finger and thumb of his right hand. It was the remains of his blue bus-ticket : he had, it appeared, torn it methodically in half, then into four, then into eight, then into sixteen, and had then arranged the fragments neatly together like a miniature pack of cards. He flicked it away and it fell to the floor in a little blue snowstorm. When he had climbed down the curved stair and reached the pavement, he began to walk slowly in the direction of his club.

CHAPTER XIV

If the mind, haunting the scenes of old happenings, could project a shadowy semblance of the thinker into those scenes, the inmates of the Milvaines' house might on this Saint Christopher's day have caught strange glimpses of a ghostly Christopher and a ghostly Rosamund flitting down the terrace and across the lawns ; for Rosamund too had been dreaming of that week-end at the Milvaines' eight years ago.

She had by now laid the dinner-table and arranged the fruit and flowers on it ; the last details had been settled with the cook ; the drawing-room was ready. There were still four hours before the dinner-party, and the only matter that remained still unsettled was that of the wine.

She was sitting now in the little morning-room on the ground-floor, with her tea on a tray at her elbow. The preparations for the evening and this gnawing anxiety about Christopher had exhausted her, and she lay, with limbs and body relaxed, in a deep armchair, gazing into the fire. While she had been busy, her anxiety about Christopher had lain dormant, but now it returned to torment her, rousing in her a crowd of conflicting thoughts and emotions. She kept telling herself that he was not going to return. He had gone, perhaps : gone for good. Perhaps she would never see him again. That

treatment of him which her evil angel so often dictated, to the horror and remorse of her good angel, had at last done its work.

No, it was impossible. If he had been wounded to the point of leaving her, he would have betrayed intenser feeling than the simple outburst of the morning. Besides, Christopher was not very sensitive : he had that kind of stubbornness, of stupidity, which belongs only to insensitive people. Still, he had had, undeniably, rather an unhappy time during the last six years. That was all he had got in return for loving her. Why, oh, why was it that he roused such resentment in her ? Why was she compelled to go on punishing him like this ?

She recalled her first meeting with him at the Milvaines'. He had seemed to her charmingly boyish, with his fresh face and his quick alternations from shyness to impulsive confidence. It had been difficult to believe that he was thirty-one, four years older than herself, for she had felt years older than him, old in experience of life and the tragedy of life. Obviously he had never suffered as she had. It was true he had been to the war ; but they had all seemed to enjoy that. His life had never been desolated by a great passion.

She had been pleased by his obvious admiration of her and by his way of treating her as an intellectual equal. How clearly she could picture him as he had appeared to her then. Poor Christopher ! What remained now of that youthfulness which she had thought so charming ? Life had turned out very different for him from what he had expected. And all because of her.

No. No. Her wounded conscience rose in protest. He had brought it on himself. It was not her fault : she couldn't help herself. And yet, when he had this morning implored her at least to be friendly, her heart had smitten her. What was it that had made her draw away from him when he had made that request ? His face, as he had looked at her, flashed upon her now with sudden vividness. " Oh, Christopher, dear ; I'm a beast, a swine. I don't really want to be like this. Come back, my dear ; come back and I'll try to make you happy." She turned her face to the cushion that propped her head and broke into a low, spasmodic sobbing.

After a while she sat up, and, taking out a handkerchief, dried her eyes. She remembered wearily that she must do something about the wine. If she waited much longer, in the hope that Christopher would return, it might be too late to have it sent from Harrod's. She felt with a sudden sense of lassitude that she could not cope with it. Why was it that everything went wrong with her ? Nobody could say it was her fault. She hated complications : All she asked was that life should be simple and happy. And yet, whatever she did, troubles and disaster always came of it. She was the helpless victim of an evil fate. " Where'er I came, I brought calamity."

What did that come from ? Some poem she had learnt at school. " She, turning on my face the star-like "—or was it starry ?—" sorrows of immortal eyes." A fine, romantic phrase, that.

Tennyson ! Of course, it was Tennyson. " A Dream of Fair Women." How did the passage

begin? "At length I saw a queen . . . ?" "A lady." Yes, that was it.

> At length I saw a lady within call,
> Stiller than chisell'd marble standing there;
> A daughter of the gods, divinely tall,
> And most divinely fair.
>
> Her loveliness with shame and with surprise
> Froze my swift speech: she turning on my face
> The star-like sorrows of immortal eyes,
> Spoke slowly in her place.
>
> "I had great beauty: ask not thou my name:
> No one can be more wise than destiny.
> Many took swords and died. Where'er I came
> I brought calamity."

Rosamund rose from her chair. A Chippendale mirror hung over a sofa, and, standing with her hands clasped before her, she gazed into it long and intently.

At last she turned away with a sigh and went to get Harrod's Wine List. But no; what was the good of a wine list if she didn't know what wines to order? She would have to go and consult one of the men in the wine department. Yet *could* she, possibly? It would be so horribly *infra dig.* to betray her ignorance to a shopman.

Mrs. Beeton! A happy thought. Perhaps Mrs. Beeton would have something to say about wines. From a bottom shelf of the bookcase she pulled out the large 1923 edition of *Mrs. Beeton* and turned to the index. "Wines, home-made. Apple, Apricot, Blackcurrant . . ." That was no good. "Wineglasses, page 1397." Was that all? No: further back there was "Wine, Jelly . . . Sauce . . . Service of . . ."

"Service of" was more promising. Page 1338. Rosamund found the place.

"Service of Wine.—Formerly it was considered necessary that a different kind of wine should accompany each course, and they were served in the following order: Chablis or Sauterne with the hors d'œuvre; sherry or Marsala with soup; hock or Sauterne with fish; claret or Burgundy with entrées; champagne with roast and entremets; port, claret, or Madeira with the dessert. Now the number of wines introduced at one meal is considerably reduced. Sometimes a glass of good sherry, or mineral waters with whisky, is served with the soup, after which champagne, or a red or a white wine, is served until the dessert, when port and old claret take its place. Frequently one, or at the most two, kinds of wine are served throughout the meal, and these are either claret or Burgundy and champagne, or champagne alone."

Rosamund closed *Mrs. Beeton* with a sigh of relief. Everything was clear now: *Mrs. Beeton* had stimulated her memory. She knew that on special occasions one always had champagne, and she remembered that Christopher, and in old days the Milvaines, always provided port with the dessert. There would be cocktails, of course, before they went down to dinner, but there was no difficulty about that. She herself always mixed the cocktails: the materials and the shaker were in the cupboard in the dining-room sideboard. All she would have to order, then, was champagne and port. She fetched the wine list and turned to the champagnes. "Ayala. Bollinger. Veuve Clicquot. Heidsieck.

Moët & Chandon. Pol Roger." Which, among this babel of names, was the right one? And there were the various years of each, to complicate matters.

And the ports. Ought she to get a port "matured in wood," or a "vintage" port? And which was she to choose among Cockburn, Croft, Dow, Martinez, and all the others? It was probably fairly safe in both cases to be guided by the price. After much thought she decided on Moët & Chandon "Dry Imperial, 1920." The prices of the old vintage ports horrified her, but she found, among the "matured in wood," one described as "a fine old wine of vintage character" which was much cheaper. That would have to do. Would one bottle be enough for eight people? Safer to order two. And the champagne: how much would they drink? Three people to a bottle ought, surely, to be enough. That would mean three bottles, which would leave a little extra over in case of emergency. She went into the hall and telephoned the order to Harrod's.

Everything was ready now. There was nothing more to worry about; nothing, that is, except Christopher. Her anxieties returned to her now with redoubled force. If only she could go away and leave everything, the dinner-party, the servants, her friends—everything. She longed for peace, a long rest somewhere far away with no one to bother her. It was monstrous of Christopher to treat her like this. If only he had been honest with her she would know now where she stood. He was leaving her in doubt on purpose, just to torture her. Like all other men he was a brute. What a fool she had been to

listen to all his sentimental talk and let him persuade her to marry him. She had known all the time that she would never love him. Love him ! She hated him now, loathed him with all the strength of her being.

And yet, if only he would come back . . .

CHAPTER XV

Stirring himself in the deep armchair in his club reading-room, Christopher poured himself out another cup of tea and lit a cigarette. He had been recalling the rest of that week-end at the Milvaines'. Sunday, he remembered, had brought a woeful disillusionment. For Rosamund Vernon had, it seemed, forgotten their cordiality of the preceding day : she treated him just as she treated everyone else. There was no hint, in her behaviour towards him, of the smallest mutual understanding. All morning and all afternoon he had hardly seen anything of her. It was not that she had actually avoided him, but she had certainly failed, more than once, to take opportunities of walking and talking with him. She had treated him, he thought, almost as a stranger, and he had spent the day in gloom and disappointment until after tea.

But after tea, as he had emerged from the front door, determined to take a walk in the garden by himself, he had found her walking in front of the house alone, and she had asked him if he would care for a stroll. Had she been deliberately playing with him, Christopher wondered now. But at the time the thought had never entered his head. It had been enough for him that all was well between them

again, and in an instant his gloom had vanished and they had set off together.

At dinner they had been separated again ; afterwards he had been unable to get her to himself ; and when she and the other women had said good night she had given him only the most meagre of smiles.

An hour later, when the men also retired, old Milvaine as they climbed the stairs had pressed Christopher to stay until after lunch next day, assuring him that the others would be staying till the afternoon train. Hearing that, Christopher had instantly accepted, in spite of work awaiting him in town. The work would have to take care of itself : he was not going to throw away the chance of a journey up to town with Rosamund Vernon.

But next morning had brought a bitter disappointment. It was a clear, dewy April morning. In the dining-room one wing of the French window stood open, letting in a delicious air with a subtle tang of the sea in it, and Christopher and Elizabeth Relton, having finished breakfast before the others, had stepped out on to the terrace and walked down the drive to the lodge-gates ; and, passing outside, they had crossed the road and leaned over a field gate, looking down over the meadows that fell towards the marsh and over the bright green of the marsh itself to the sea, which lay, blue as an iris petal, under the unclouded blue of the sky. For some time they had said nothing. That was the best of Elizabeth Relton : one never had the feeling, with her, that conversation flagged, for the silences seemed as much a part of conversation with her as the talk.

Christopher, with Rosamund in his thoughts, the

expanse of green meadow and blue sea before him, and that live, pure April air on his face and in his blood, felt the thrill of a new and intenser life. He glanced at Elizabeth Relton. She was gazing out towards the sea : on her face was an expression of perfect repose, and he noticed for the first time the delicate refinement of her profile. " At times like these," he said at last, " I envy you. I wish I could write poetry."

Miss Relton turned to him with her charming smile. " Perhaps you can," she said. " Have you tried ? "

" I've tried enough to prove to myself that I can't," said Christopher.

" Yes," she said, " that is always the first discovery. And the next is to acquire some sort of control over words and rhythms in which to fail to express what you want to express."

" And the next ? " asked Christopher.

" There is no next," she said.

" So it's always failure ? "

" It's failure in the sense that the achievement always falls lamentably short of the aspiration. You aim at the moon and you hit a haystack, or perhaps, if you are a better shot, a flower or a bird."

" Yes, I understand that," said Christopher. " I see, for instance, that if one tried to express this morning, one might catch, at most, one or two aspects of it, and even those very imperfectly. How, for example, could one reproduce in poetry or in any other art the extraordinary quality of the air ? I feel I ought to be furiously taking notes, pinning every detail down before we lose it for ever."

"Ah, but we don't lose it," said Miss Relton. "We lose nothing. But you don't save it by noting it down either on paper or in your mind. I used to try to, and very troublesome it was : I found that I was always losing so much in my attempts to preserve so little. But if you give up trying, if you forget all about poetry and yourself, and lose yourself and become part of the thing you desire, then you find that it has become a part of you."

"You believe, then, that everyone could write poetry ? " asked Christopher, smiling.

"No," she said, "because everyone doesn't want to. But those who desire to intensely enough, can."

"Could I ? "

"I can't say, my friend. I don't know how much you want to. But the fact that you proved to yourself that you couldn't, proved nothing. It was a sign of grace, that's all."

She turned from the gate, and they began to walk back towards the house.

When they were half-way down the drive a car came towards them from the house. It stopped when it reached them, and Christopher's heart leapt to his throat, for Rosamund Vernon leaned out of the car. "Good-bye," she said. "I've got to catch the nine-fifty."

Christopher, sipping at his club tea, could still feel the horrible sinking of the heart with which he had realised that she was gone. In his trouble he had not been able to remember if he had answered her good-bye or given her so much as a wave or a glance.

His ecstatic mood of a minute ago was shattered into a thousand fragments. He longed to go away and

hide himself like a wounded animal. How could he endure now to wait till the afternoon train? He must get away, escape from the unbearable emptiness which Rosamund had left behind her. He could hardly find a voice to answer Elizabeth Relton, who was praising Rosamund's beauty, and as soon as they had reached the house he had gone to the library and looked out the trains to London. The next was at eleven forty-five. He sought out Mrs. Milvaine, made vague excuses, and two hours later he and his bag were on the platform waiting for the London train.

Christopher poured out all that remained of his tea and lit another cigarette. How quiet everything was. Grasping the arms of his chair, he twisted his body round and surveyed the reading-room. Every chair was empty : there was not a soul in the room except himself. The windows looked east, and in the sunless afternoon light, so equable and soothing after the sharp contrasts of light and shade out-of-doors, the large, palatial room—with its sober walling of books, the tall green pillars and gilded Ionic capitals that supported the coffered ceiling, the wide marble fireplaces, the grey, watery mirrors and tall windows, and the dark blue carpet—was a great submarine cavern, empty of all sound and movement and bright lights, and all else but the pale, motionless sea-water that flooded it from floor to ceiling.

How consoling it was to escape from the office, with all its depressing associations and the interruptions to which he was liable there, into this peaceful limbo. A melancholy contentment descended upon him as he watched the smoke from his discarded cigarette rise vertically from the ash-tray,

like a strand of blue-grey wool, to its crown of wavering and widening spirals.

He could recall, as if he had experienced them only yesterday, his feelings when he awoke on the morning after his sudden flight from the Milvaines'. All the details of his visit, and Rosamund Vernon herself, had receded to an immense distance from him. It seemed to him unbelievable, in that dry, clear, early morning mood, that he should have got himself into such a curious emotional state over one of the visitors. Three days ago he had never so much as set eyes on her. He had known her only a few hours, and he knew actually very little about her. Had he gone a little mad? But he was sane enough now, he had felt, as he sat up in bed; and what were his feelings about her now?

He found it impossible to tell. He felt calm and commonplace; empty of any emotions whatsoever. Emotions did not belong to the morning. They were things that began to spring up in the afternoon, and were never full-blown till evening. And yet what was the meaning of those mental intimations, so free, it seemed, from any emotional quality, yet actual and precise as notches cut in wood or the figures in a railway-guide, that registered for him the fact that he was in love with Rosamund? Yes, the fact was there, but at the moment it evoked no corresponding emotion. Later in the day he would perhaps realise what it implied.

And later in the day he began to catch remembered glimpses of Rosamund; of the slightly supercilious lift of her dark eyebrows as she turned to listen to the young artist who sat at her side at

dinner ; the delightful sparkle of her eyes and the warm flowering of her face when something irresistibly amusing swept her suddenly out of her accustomed calm ; the supple, leisurely movement of her walk ; the deep note in her voice when she spoke of anything in which she specially delighted. He recollected with a little twinge of misgiving that she had expressed an enthusiasm for the music of Debussy and Ravel, the poetry of Swinburne, and the paintings of Rossetti and Burne-Jones. He himself heartily disliked all five of them, but, remembering again the lovely note in her voice when she had spoken of them, he felt deeply remorseful at having confessed his dislike and so checked her enthusiasm. It was like quenching the happiness of a child.

Yes, he had discovered, that evening, that after all he was beyond a doubt in love with her, and at first he had been so wrapped up in his love that he hardly minded that he had let her go without discovering her address in town and arranging to meet her again. But, as the days passed, he began to hunger for a sight of her, and at last, unable to bear it any longer, he had written to little Mrs. Milvaine for her address.

The answer he had received had been crushing. Miss Vernon had gone to stay with an aunt in Yorkshire until September. How long was that? Five months. For five months there would not be the smallest hope of seeing her. She would be away, away among people of whom he knew nothing, meeting, no doubt, other men who would fall in love with her ; for who that saw her could help falling in love with her? Perhaps she herself would fall in

love. Good God ! It was quite likely that when she returned to town she would already be engaged to be married.

For some weeks he had fluctuated between rapture, gentle melancholy, and black depression ; but by the middle of June he was becoming resigned. The image of Rosamund was growing somewhat faint, for it takes more than two days to stamp a clear and lasting memory on the mind. She was no longer so engrossing a preoccupation with him : little by little life, with its endlessly changing interests, reclaimed him. It no longer seemed to him that life without her would be unendurable.

He was invited to go to Verona for a fortnight in June, and the wonder of San Zeno, the Piazza dell' Erbe, the great red battlemented bridge that springs out of the Castle and across the swirling Adige, the palaces with their red marble balconies, the churches, the tombs, and the huge Roman arena had fed his mind with images of beauty more recent and more exciting than the paling image of Rosamund. When he had returned to London, the question whether or not he would meet her again had ceased to be a thing of vital importance.

With August came the Promenade Concerts at the Queen's Hall, and Christopher, overtaken by one of his periodic hungers for music, had gone two or three times a week and stood in the promenade, sometimes with friends and sometimes alone. He had gone alone one night when it seemed that the heat would be unendurable, but the César Franck symphony was on the programme. It came third, and he was resolved to leave as soon as it was over.

He had forgotten long since what the first item on the programme had been, but he remembered well enough that Debussy's " L'Après-Midi D'un Faune " came second. The wayward, bubbling music seemed to fill the sultry hall with the coolness of winking pools and the scattered showers of fountains. Christopher forgot his dislike of Debussy. The music, that night, seemed to him the most delicious thing in the world, and he gave himself up to it so completely that the Queen's Hall and London and England vanished and he was lost in a leafy, watery Arcadia, haunted by nymphs and satyrs.

When the piece was finished and the applause had died down, Christopher, rediscovering the Queen's Hall after his absence in Arcadia, had heard a voice at his elbow. " I thought you didn't like Debussy ? "

He turned his head sharply. Rosamund was standing beside him. To be faced with her so unexpectedly, to have the faded image of his memory so suddenly obliterated by the dazzling reality of her standing before him, was a shock so great that he could not at first master himself, and he had stood, blushing and open-mouthed, staring at her dumbly. But Rosamund herself had been perfectly in command of the situation. She had held out her hand : " How nice to see you again," she had said, meeting his bewildered gaze with her straight glance.

Of what he had said to her and she to him in the brief interval before the Franck symphony began, Christopher could remember little. He had, he recollected, asked her if she was alone, and learned, to his relief, that she was. And he had enquired, too, if she intended to stay to the end. " I think it's too

hot, don't you ? " she had answered. " I only came to hear the ' Après-Midi ' and the symphony."

" So did I," said Christopher.

" What, your pet aversion, Debussy ? " She smiled at him mockingly.

Christopher laughed. " Well, the Franck," he admitted. " But the ' Après-Midi ' was enchanting all the same. But can't we go somewhere cool as soon as the symphony's over ? We might go and drink iced drinks somewhere."

" It will have to be somewhere obscure, then," said Rosamund, " because I'm dressed in my worst."

" Are you ? " said Christopher, gazing at her with kindling eyes. " I should have thought——"

A sudden clatter of applause had cut him short. Sir Henry was working his way through violins and cellos towards the conductor's desk, and next moment he was holding orchestra and audience in silent concentration on his raised bâton. Christopher and Rosamund had exchanged a glance of gleeful anticipation and then launched out into the sea of music. How incredible it had seemed to him then, that he could ever have ceased to love her or that he could have forgotten her exquisite and disturbing beauty. From the moment his eyes had met hers a few minutes ago, he knew beyond a shadow of doubt that he loved her inescapably, more even than on the day when he had seen her vanish from him so abruptly at the Milvaines'. The symphony, with its mystery, its rich melancholy, and the exultant outbursts of the brass, seemed to him in his ecstatic mood to express all the heights and depths, all the raptures and despairs of love. He did not look at

Rosamund. The knowledge that she was there, at his side, was enough. Like a disembodied spirit, he sailed, enchanted, upon the changing moods of the music, surged up on its rising crests, plunged darkly into its troughs, swam upon its smooth and level calms. There was not a care, not the smallest cloud in his life to impair his utter enjoyment of it. Rosamund was with him, and, when the symphony was over and it was time to return to earth, they would go out together.

The reading-room door opened softly. Christopher glanced round, afraid that it might be some club acquaintance breaking in upon his solitude ; but it was only a waiter coming to remove his tray. Christopher paid him, and, as the door quietly closed again, dropped back into his memories.

" And to think," he reflected bitterly, " that it should have ended in this." That exultant sense of liberation which, as he listened to the music, had roused him to such rapture that it had been almost impossible for him to refrain from shouting aloud and dancing, had been mere self-deception.

But had it ? Surely it had not been inevitable that things should have developed as, in fact, they had done. But for one or two unlucky chances, everything—he believed it still—might have been well with them. But that night, at least, all had been supremely well ; and, looking back on his radiant happiness then and in the months that followed, Christopher felt even now that it had been worth all the disillusionment and misery that had come after. At the mere memory of it his pulse rose and his heart warmed with something of the old rapture, and he

actually moved impulsively in his chair as he recalled how, when the symphony was over, he had turned eagerly towards her, and, finding her eyes ready for his, had led the way through the standing crowd towards the exit.

As they had stepped out into the clean night air of Langham Place, it had seemed to him that they had emerged into some warm southern garden, fragrant with hidden blossom. They had crossed the street and walked towards Oxford Circus, and before they reached the Circus they had turned into a shop—was it an Appenrodt's ?—and had sat there talking over tall glasses of iced coffee crowned with cream, until Rosamund had announced that it was time for her to go home. Before they had parted that night, she had promised to lunch with him two days later, and during the whole of September and October, they had met three or four times a week.

Was she in love with him? Christopher, try though he might to discount both his hopes and his fears, could not discover. Evidently she liked him—liked him, it seemed, very much indeed. The smile with which she greeted him and her alacrity in accepting his invitations showed him at least that much. But how much further than liking did her feelings for him go? It had seemed to Christopher improbable that a woman should consent cheerfully to spend several hours three or four times a week with a man unless she was in love with him, especially when it must be apparent to her that he was in love with her. And yet, he had reflected, women are notoriously fond of admiration, and so his undisguised admiration of her might have provided a

sufficient inducement. But no. That interpretation of her friendliness was, he had felt, unfair to Rosamund. Surely she, with her charming sincerity and directness, was incapable of exploiting his love for her merely to indulge her vanity. But the question had not troubled him much. His optimistic nature had been content to enjoy his present happiness and to leave the future in the hands of a kindly fate.

What an optimist he had been in those days, how childishly trusting, he reflected now, feeling himself, in his bitter knowledge of life and its tragic cross-currents, to be half a century, and not merely eight short years, older than the eager, immature creature he had been at the age of thirty-two. Again the door of the reading-room opened, and two men entered. One of them he knew slightly, and, feeling a little ashamed of being discovered sitting there alone and unoccupied at such an hour, he rose from his chair and, going over to the magazine table, selected the current number of the *London Mercury*.

CHAPTER XVI

It was on October the eighth that he had proposed to Rosamund. They had lunched together in a little French restaurant in Soho which they had lately adopted. It was one of those mellow autumn days when the coming of winter is forgotten and it seems that summer has returned, and Christopher had suggested, as they sat over their coffee, that they should spend the afternoon at Hampton Court. In the middle of the week at that late season they would have the place almost to themselves.

It was the first time they had been out of London together and every detail of the short journey from Waterloo had thrilled him. To buy her ticket, to sit beside her and talk to her in the railway-carriage where perhaps the other travellers mistook them for husband and wife, to have her, as it were, in his charge, had seemed to him to bring a new and thrilling intimacy into their relation.

When the train ran into the little terminus and they saw the old red palace, sunk among the mounded golds and yellows of its autumnal trees, waiting for them across the river, he had felt that they had left London far behind and magically eloped into the ancient, mellow fairyland of a forgotten age. Rosamund had never been to Hampton Court and she had been enchanted by the beauty

of the place. He had led her through the great red courts, so silent and so ripe in the October sun, and through that sombre, cloistered court where the tall windows of the gallery look down on to the square of grass, and the dripping of the fountain and the occasional flutter of a pigeon are the only sounds that invade the hollow silence of brick and stone. Something of the chill of autumnal night-frosts had lurked in that shadowy place and in the stone hall beyond it, whose iron gates lead into the gardens ; but through the gates they had emerged into the golden, flower-scented warmth of summer.

The great space before the palace was glowing with colour. Green lawns and wide paths spread before them, and in the flower-beds smouldered the splendid wreckage of summer. In the middle, about the round, stone-edged fountain-pond, stood a grove of black yews, and behind it, drawn across the entire width of the garden, towered the great golden screen of lime-trees which borders the moat. In the long borders beneath the walls on either side of the palace-front Michaelmas daisies raised their mounds of mauve, violet, and rose, and dahlias scarlet, orange, crimson, pink, and yellow and a few late roses burned in colours richer and riper than the colours of summer among the reds and yellows of autumn foliage. The afternoon sunlight, laid like great ragged carpets upon the lawns and upon the tawny palace-walls, was orange as a ripe apricot.

Christopher and Rosamund walked towards the central pond and sat down on one of the seats among the yews. How incredibly beautiful the

garden was. Christopher found himself thinking of Elizabeth Relton, and he asked Rosamund if she had seen her since they had met at the Milvaines'.

Then they had begun to discuss Elizabeth Relton. "She's such a pathetic creature," Rosamund had said. "Life seems, somehow, to have missed her."

That view of Elizabeth Relton had surprised Christopher. "Missed her? Surely not," he had replied. "I always feel that she has a marvellous gift for absorbing life; that everything that has happened to her still lives, green and alive, in that fertile mind of hers. She's the most human creature I ever met."

"No," said Rosamund, and it had struck him at the time that there was something coldly judicial in her tone; "she's too virginal."

"And that, you feel, is a fault?"

"Well, I certainly feel that it's a limitation in a woman never to have known love."

A sudden pang of jealousy had seized Christopher. Rosamund herself, then, had known love. He felt keenly jealous of the men she had loved, men of whom he knew nothing. He turned to her. "How many times have you been in love?" he asked, trying to appear to put the question without too much seriousness.

Rosamund smiled, and there was a detachment in her smile which stung him. "Are you trying to be my father-confessor?" she asked.

"Men must often have fallen in love with you," said Christopher. "How could they help it? I've loved you from the moment I first met you at the

Milvaines'. You know that well enough, don't you ? "

Rosamund turned and looked at him intently. " Do you mean that, Christopher ? " she had asked.

" Yes, indeed I do."

" But you mustn't, my dear. You mustn't love me. I have no love to give you in return."

Christopher had felt a sudden chill creep round his heart. " Do you mean that you could never love me ? " he had asked falteringly.

" If I could have loved anyone," she had replied, " I might have loved you, because I'm awfully fond of you, Christopher. But I shall never love anyone again. You see "—her voice was low and there was a little catch in it—" you see, I've been very unhappy."

He saw that tears were running down her face. " My dear," he said, his heart wrung by the sight of her weeping, " I'm most awfully sorry." He took her hand in both his. She did not withdraw it, and with the other she dried her eyes on a small pink handkerchief. " If only I could make you happy," he said.

Rosamund gazed at him with pity in her face. " How cruel life is," she said. " Why can't we love those who love us ? "

" Then you—" Christopher enquired hesitatingly, " you love someone else ? "

" No, I hate him," said Rosamund, with a sudden subdued violence. " He has wrecked my life."

Her words brought unhoped-for consolation to Christopher. In the ardour of his love for her the

faintest glimmer of hope was enough to restore his confidence. The blessed assurance that she was not in love with another man warmed his heart. Then it was only a question of time, he felt. His love for her, so irresistible and so pervasive as it seemed to him, could not fail in the end to kindle an answer in her heart.

" I'll tell you about it, Christopher," she had said. " It's only fair you should know " ; and, putting away her handkerchief, she had told him her story of Norman, of how she had given herself utterly into his hands, given him her heart, all her hopes of happiness, her very life, and how he had used his power over her to torture her, how he had deceived her, given her nothing, or almost nothing, in return for all she had so recklessly given him.

" He wrecked my life," she had said once more. " Nothing can ever be the same again."

Christopher had felt a desperate longing to comfort her, to make up to her for all she had suffered and give her back the faith in life which she had lost. He stroked the slim hand which he still held in his, and, as her eyes met his, she smiled sadly.

" So you see, you mustn't fall in love with me, Christopher," she said. " It isn't that I don't like you. I like you better than any man I ever knew."

" Even better than him ? " he had asked shyly.

" Oh, much, much better. But I loved him ; and I don't love you, my poor Christopher. Can't we go on happily, as we are now, being just friends ? I'm always so happy with you. If I loved you, everything would go wrong : I know it would."

" No, dear. Everything would go right," he said.

"You don't imagine, do you, that I would deceive you and torture you? Oh, do try to love me, Rosamund dearest. How happy we should be. You would forget all about this unhappiness and life would become simple again."

She stroked the hand that was holding hers. "My poor Christopher," she said: "you *are* sweet. If I could love you, I would: but no, I won't wrong you by trying to."

Yes, she had said that, Christopher remembered as he sat in the club reading-room with the *London Mercury* open on his knee, trembling even now at the memory of that long-vanished afternoon in the garden at Hampton Court. She had warned him; she had honestly wished to save him from what was to come. How could he blame her now for what had followed? Had he not brought it on himself, and on her too, by his persistence? And yet, how innocent he had been in intention. His one desire had been to make her happy.

And he *had* made her happy. For a year she had been marvellously happy: she had told him so a hundred times, though she had denied it since and accused him bitterly of deluding her and of forcing her to delude herself. And to this day they might have been happy if, when the moment came, she had shown some strength of mind and had had the generosity to be true to him as he had been to her.

Besides, though she had warned him, the final responsibility for his persistence had been hers, not his; for when, some weeks later, he had ceased to persist and told her that he was forcing himself to forget her, she had deliberately called him back to

her. She could never deny that : he had the letter, still, in which she had done it. Documentary evidence ! How horrible it was that they should have come to the point of coldly assessing the responsibility in such a matter. But, thank God, he had refrained from referring to her letter during their quarrel this morning. It would have been too profane, he had felt, too brutal to drag it out as evidence in those fierce recriminations. How woefully different it was now from those early days when all between them was cordial and affectionate. That afternoon at Hampton Court had left an exquisite fragrance in his mind, for her affection and sympathy had been so divinely consoling that he had felt almost happy despite the disappointment of his hopes. And hope had still remained, for there had been no suggestion that they should part, or even see less of one another than before. On the contrary, she had begged him not to leave her, telling him that his friendship was her greatest happiness and consolation. All she had asked was that he would forget that he loved her and try to regard her thenceforward simply as a friend.

"Do you feel you can do that, Christopher?" she had asked ; and he, unspeakably consoled at the prospect of still seeing her as often as before, had declared unhesitatingly that he would try. After all, he had told himself, friendship played so large a part in his love for her that her friendship, though it denied him the supreme happiness, would give him much, very much, almost as much as a man has a right to hope for in this world.

And so they had gone on meeting as before, and

from time to time Rosamund had enquired after his "complaint," and he had replied that it was better, or so-so, or that he was suffering from a slight relapse. But the truth had been that he had fallen more and more in love with her.

How enchanting she had been in those days, more enchanting by far than he had at first supposed : for, as they became more intimate, the quietness and reserve which had at first seemed so characteristic of her had vanished and disclosed a charming gaiety, a sense of humour and a capacity for simple enjoyment, which he had not suspected. And her face had altered too : its cold beauty was constantly being transfigured now by vitality and colour ; and there was that laugh of hers, that sudden flowering of her face, the sudden flash of her dark eyes and her beautiful teeth, and the reckless toss of her head which never failed to intoxicate him with love of her so that he could hardly resist the temptation to catch her in his arms.

It was six years, he reflected, since he had seen her laugh like that. Six years. The very thought was a tragedy ; a tragedy for him and, no less, a tragedy for her. And yet . . . he would never be able to rid himself of the belief that, if she had wanted to, she could have prevented it ; that it had been some dark, deep-seated wilfulness in her which had been resolved at all costs to prove his optimism shallow. And it seemed to him now, fresh from his dreams of that enchanting Rosamund of eight years ago, that the later Rosamund was another woman, a sinister and revengeful creature who had intruded upon their happiness and out of mere envy set herself to wreck it.

And yet had there not, after all, been something strange in the earlier Rosamund too? Was there not something strange in her being so eager to meet him and taking such obvious pleasure in being with him, and yet persisting in holding him at arm's length? He, of course, had hoped that as time went by she would change her mind, that by degrees she would bring herself to admit her love for him; for her behaviour towards him was the behaviour of a woman in love. But the weeks had slipped by, and still she had persisted in discouraging his love explicitly, while implicitly she invited him to persevere, until, in that limbo in which there seemed to be neither retreat nor advance, his happiness had begun to flag and the strain had begun to be unbearable to him.

So the weeks had passed. Autumn had turned to winter: it was almost Christmas-time. Christopher was going to spend Christmas with his mother, and the day before he left London he and Rosamund had dined together at their accustomed restaurant. Sitting opposite to her at the little corner table where they always sat, with the prospect of their separation gnawing at his heart, he had been almost overpowered by the urgency of his longing for her. What was the good of their going on like this? She treated him always as an acknowledged lover, yet she persisted, none the less, in declaring that she could never love again and implored him still to put love out of his mind. If she really meant what she said, he was simply laying up suffering for himself by continuing to see her.

For some day an end must come: he could not

endure the continuous provocation and excitement of her presence if he was denied all hope that she would be his. And yet, was it not already too late to escape? Whether he stayed or fled he was bound to suffer horribly; but, at least, if he were to force himself to break with her now, the agony would be less protracted. For some minutes he had sat lost in these thoughts, oblivious of her presence. Then, raising his eyes, he had found her sitting opposite to him, her face softly coloured by the rose-shaded lamp on the table beside them. Her eyes, full and dark, were fixed upon him with an intent and half-amused gaze. "You're very thoughtful to-night," she had said. "What's the matter?"

Christopher had tried, and almost failed, to smile. "The complaint is rather bad this evening," he had said, with a feeble attempt to appear frivolous.

"Oh, Chris, do you mean to say you haven't recovered yet?" Her tone was indulgently reproachful, but her face flushed and her eyes shone: she flowered with pleasure and excitement under his adoration. The whole visible Rosamund answered his unspoken summons: "Take me; I'm waiting for you," she was saying more clearly than words. "Whatever I say, however I struggle and refuse, capture me and bind me. You are the stronger."

"No," said Christopher, answering her spoken question; "I haven't recovered and I haven't been trying to. Why should I? I love you more than ever I did: you know I do. Don't you love me just a little, Rosamund? I'm sure you do. Everything

about you except your words tells me you do. Only think how happy we might be together."

Rosamund's face had clouded as he spoke : all the invitation had died out of it now. " But it's impossible, Christopher," she had said, with a weary gesture. " I've told you already that I can't love you : I shall never love anyone again after Norman. Oh, don't spoil it all, Christopher. I always feel so secure with you. We're such good friends : I've never had such a friend as you."

" Then why not marry me ? " said Christopher. " If you feel that you'll never love again and if you feel so safe and happy with me, why not marry me, Rosamund ? You told me, when we were at Hampton Court that day, that you liked me better than any man you'd ever known."

" Yes. It was true. I do," said Rosamund desperately.

" Then couldn't you be happy with me as your husband ? Do you feel you would have too much of me if we lived together ? "

" No, it isn't that. But everything would go wrong if we were lovers. Oh, can't you understand ? "

He remembered still the helpless, baffled feeling which had come over him in the face of her dogged and inexplicable resistance. " No, I can't understand," he had replied wearily.

But Rosamund had persisted. " Can't you see that all our friendship and happiness would go if we sacrificed our independence ? "

He saw now, clearly enough, what was the true significance of her words, but neither he nor she herself had understood it at the time. For the truth

had been that she was afraid to resign herself. She was willing to accept all he had to give, but she was not willing to give in return. The happy, generous part of her kept calling to him inarticulately to take her by storm, to convince the cowardly, selfish part which had been scared and wounded and driven back upon itself by some long-forgotten wrong. But the generous part was feeble and dumb and the selfish part was strong and articulate : it had proved in the end too strong both for him and for her.

In the quiet sea-cavern of the reading-room Christopher debated the subject of personal responsibility. Nowadays physiology and psychology tend to relieve the individual of all responsibility. If he is not all that he ought to be, it is not his fault : the fault is in his unconscious and his glands. That was determinism with a vengeance : where was the use of Southwark Cathedral if sin and repentance, salvation and damnation were all a matter of glands ? What, then, was the good of any moral effort, any choice between the arduous and altruistic and the selfish and lax ? But that, the determinist would object, is begging the question. The choice does not exist, he would say ; the illusion that we are confronted with alternatives, that we make a moral effort to choose, is a disease of the glands or the unconscious.

For Christopher, the problem, when applied to himself, was insignificant. If life itself seems good—and still, in spite of all, he knew that life was good—what does it matter whether all we do is free or preordained ? But when we apply the problem to the

behaviour of others, it makes all the difference in the world. In the case of Rosamund, it made all the difference, for Christopher, between whether she was the helpless victim of her infirmities or a wilful egoist and a moral coward who was completely responsible for the disaster which had befallen him.

He heaved a deep sigh and wearily dismissed the question. Thinking would not solve it ; and, besides, he could not, try as he might, exonerate her. He could not forgive her for proving untrue to the Rosamund whom he had so passionately loved. Yes, she had been afraid to resign her independence, and it was this that had wrecked everything. This was what had called from her that strange question : " Can't you see that all our friendship and happiness would go if we sacrificed our independence ? "

He had answered her sullenly. " Independence ! And how much is left, do you imagine, of my independence ? "

" But you promised, Christopher, weeks ago," she had replied, " that you would try to recover."

" I don't want to recover, my dear," said Christopher, " and I don't want my independence. All I want is you. Won't you try to love me, Rosamund ; instead of trying not to all the time ? You see, I can't go on like this. I shan't be able to stand it much longer."

" Oh, Christopher ! " Her voice had a touch of petulance in it. " And I *did* believe I could rely on you. You've been my one comfort all this time. If you fail me——"

"Fail you, Rosamund?" He had felt something like rage at her extraordinary misinterpretation of his love for her. Then, with a sigh, he had abandoned all attempts to persuade her. "Well, we mustn't spoil our last evening together by arguing," he had said. "But promise me this, dearest; that you will think it all over very seriously and write to me."

"Yes, Christopher, I will. I promise." She spoke eagerly, and at once she was cheerful again, and before long he too, under the spell of her careless vivacity, had shaken off his trouble and become almost as cheerful as she was. The rest of the evening had been one of the gayest and most affectionate of their evenings together, and it was not until he was bidding her good-bye where the buses stop on the west side of Oxford Circus that his troubles and anxieties had taken hold of him again.

"You will think very seriously before you write, won't you, Rosie?" he had said, putting his arm through hers, and she had promised, with a solemnity in which there was a tinge of mockery, that she would. They had stood together for two or three minutes, watching for her bus; and then, all in a flash as it had seemed to him, she had darted away from him and swung herself on to the foot-board and waved to him as she stepped inside.

He had stood there till the bus started. He could see her blue shoulder and the vanishing profile of her face through the window as she sat there, quiet and self-contained, waiting for the bus to start.

She did not turn to look at him, and Christopher had received the impression that she had already forgotten all about him. . . .

Next morning he had set off for King's Cross feeling dazed and detached. Did Rosamund exist or had he dreamt about her—a troubled, haunting dream from which he had awoken into the peaceful apathy of daylight? The thought of her had lost something of its usual intensity: other thoughts and memories unconnected with her were stirring in his mind. Her absence was almost a relief to him: it was a relief to feel that the emotional agitation in which he had lived for so many weeks had died down for a while. And yet, under this superficial calm he was aware of a deep-seated anxiety, like a wound that still ached though it had ceased to throb.

As his taxi passed St. Pancras Church and turned into the Euston Road, he had recalled how at that point, years and years ago when he was still a boy, he and his father, when spending a night in town, had seen a crowd on the pavement near the church porch and had been told by someone on the edge of the crowd that a man had just shot a woman. An ambulance had driven up as they had walked away. He remembered, too, that when he used to drive from Waterloo to King's Cross on his way back from school at the end of term, he used to notice the window of a tobacconist's shop under the towering façade of the St. Pancras Hotel. Stuck across that shop-window had appeared the word SEGARS, which had always fascinated him: and now, as his taxi drove past those shops, he tried and failed to catch a glimpse of the tobacconist's, vaguely

wondering why he had chosen that strange spelling. Had it been a misguided pedantry or simply sheer ignorance?

It was a raw, grey morning. Sparse snowflakes drifted and circled in the air like grey moths seeking in vain for some flower to settle on. In the huge, chilly vault of King's Cross Station the long brown Great Northern coaches, with the steam fuming thickly up between their footboards and the edge of the platform, looked warm and luxurious, and he had felt, as he always felt at the sight of a train, an excitement light-hearted and yet melancholy.

His heart warmed at the prospect of seeing his mother again. How happy they would be together, each of them perfectly satisfied in the unchanging love of the other. The porter hoisted his bag on to the luggage-rack, and, with a sigh of contentment, Christopher had settled into a window-seat with copies of *The Times Literary Supplement*, *The New Statesman*, and *The Nation*, and a volume of Donne's poems and Voltaire's stories. He had chosen those two books for his holiday reading, but he would not read Donne for a day or two. When he had finished the papers he would read one of Voltaire's tales: "Candide," perhaps. Its clean, crystalline, acid quality would tickle his mind deliciously and never for a moment touch his heart.

For Christopher was determined to take advantage of his moment of detachment and sternly to hold at arm's length the thought of Rosamund and his aching love of her.

A long whistle-blast came from somewhere far down the platform, and next moment bookstalls,

posters, offices, and the scattered loiterers on the platform began to glide, at first solemnly and then with rapidly increasing speed, past the carriage windows, as if carried backwards on a full tide. In a minute the extreme end of the platform had been left behind and the train had thrown off the huge, dim station as a man flings off a cloak.

CHAPTER XVII

As he looked back on that Christmas visit to his mother seven years ago Christopher's heart warmed with happiness. How perfectly they had always understood one another : even now, five years after her death, it seemed to him that in some unknown way she was still with him, a living part of him, and that the serene contentment which the thought of her never failed to bring to him was not merely an evocation of the past, but a living actuality. That first evening they had sat and talked till bedtime, and, though he could not now recall one word of their talk, the sense of a complete understanding, a whole-hearted reliance on one another, and that blend of tenderness and humour which had always made their relation so vivid and refreshing, remained with him still in all its undying freshness. When Rosamund's letter had arrived on the following morning, it had seemed to him a communication from another world.

The first post, at home, arrived early in the morning. The housemaid, when she called him, had brought him that morning three letters with his early cup of tea. As soon as she had left the room he had snatched them up. He had had a desperate fear, or had it been a desperate hope, that she might not have written. But with a leap of the

heart which was half joy and half misery he had recognised Rosamund's writing, overwhelmingly, clamorously familiar, on the second of the three envelopes.

He had laid it aside and opened the other two envelopes first ; and, when at last he slowly tore open hers, he had already dropped back into his mood of calm detachment.

As he read her letter through for the first time he had had difficulty in unravelling its meaning. What was all this tangled discussion about, he had wondered coldly ; and it was not until he had read it over several times that he began to realise that it was what, somewhere at the back of his mind, he had been expecting in an agony of misgiving ever since he had parted from her in Oxford Circus two days before. What a difference there was between the happy, limpid love of him and his mother and this tangle of cross-purposes and thwarted desire.

As he read over her letter once more, his longing for her rose and kindled and broke over him in a blinding, crimson tide. He closed his eyes and lay back in bed. He did not think : there was no room in his mind for coherent thought. It had seemed to him, as he lay there, that he was nothing—body, limbs, and brain—but a pulsing mass of intense and almost unendurable sensation.

Before getting up he had read through her letter again :

" CHRISTOPHER DEAR," she had written, " what am I to say to you ? You asked me to think

seriously over our talk last night, and I promised to do so. But what, after all, was there to think about? You see, my dear, I have been consistent in my attitude ever since you first mentioned the subject. It is you who have been inconsistent. I have told you from the first, haven't I? that I can't marry you. It may seem to you natural, because you are in love with me and I am very, very fond of you, that we should marry, especially when I have told you that I shall never again love a man. But in life things are not as simple as that, Christopher. Don't think, if I say that you have not much experience of life, that I am trying to be superior. It is true, my dear. Often, when you talk to me in your direct, simple way, I feel as if I were years, centuries, older than you. You know so little of the complexities and tragedies of love. Love is a dark, explosive thing, Christopher. As soon as the passions are engaged, life becomes infinitely tangled, and I know, as certainly as I know anything, that, if I were to consent to marry you, things would immediately begin to go wrong. Don't think me ungrateful. Your love is very precious to me, and I ask nothing better than that we should go on being friends as we have been during the last four months. Everything, when I am with you, seems simple, free, and happy. With you I can sometimes forget the horrors of my experience with Norman. Do, do let things stay as they are, Christopher! I should feel—it will sound paradoxical to you, I know—but I should feel, if we were to marry, that I had lost you. Some day, perhaps, you will love another

woman, and then, I suppose, I shall have to let you go and learn to bear my troubles alone. But meanwhile do, do let us be just friends."

In the presence of that letter Christopher had felt utterly baffled. It was as if he were faced by a locked door which no knocking would ever open and no force ever break through. He must also have been aware, even if only unconsciously, of its strange inconsistencies, which were so apparent to him now as he looked back on it over an interval of more than seven years. She had accused him of inconsistency, but the true inconsistency was in her, for had she not in the same sentence begged him to love her and repelled the love he offered her? With what damnable ingenuity had she tried to hold on to him, while, in the same breath, she had claimed freedom for herself. And how frankly she had foretold the disasters which she had in store for him. Sinister creature that she was; and all the more so for being herself unconscious of her devilry. For that she was unconscious of it he was certain. In the light of all that had happened since, that letter of hers was a terrible document, and for a moment, as he sat in his club reading-room bitterly remembering their tragedy, Christopher realised what a cruel and horrible thing, both to its owner and to its victims, an ill-balanced mind can be; and, realising that, he came near to believing that the world had been created by a malevolent demon.

After that final reading of her letter, he had lain, he remembered, staring at the ceiling. There had been a light snowfall, which was reflected on the

ceiling from the garden below in a cold, hard whiteness ; and, as he lay staring at it, he had felt a resolve growing up in him. He would cure himself. Now, if ever, was the time to begin, when he was far away from London and surrounded by the peace and happiness of home and the compensating love of his mother.

Yet even then it had seemed to him that he was deliberately turning his back on all the warmth and colour of life. What would there be now to look forward to when he returned to London ? But, after all, it was his own fault : to fall in love was always to gamble with one's peace of mind. And yet, she had seemed almost as attracted by him as he was by her. He had actually expected, when he had proposed to her at Hampton Court, that she would accept him, and her refusal had been a chilling rebuff. Yet, in spite of that, he had gone on hoping, and, more dangerous still, he had gone on loving. He had fondly believed that in the end she would have him, for, in spite of her words, her behaviour had seemed to be assuring him so unmistakably that she loved him, so that when she had refused him a second time, when they had dined together two days ago, he had hardly been able to believe that she meant what she said.

But now he must force himself to believe it. After all, she had said it several times quite definitely, and now she had written it. If it seemed to him still that in her heart of hearts she did not mean it, it was only because he longed so desperately for her not to mean it. If he persisted in disbelieving her he would end by landing himself in utter misery.

Even as it was, he had brought upon himself an unhappiness from which, he felt, he would never quite recover.

Rosamund, away in London, seemed to him now very remote : he tried and failed to recall her face and the tone of her voice. But there was no remoteness about his love for her : that was acutely real, as real as a scar branded upon his heart. As he flung back the bedclothes and got out of bed, he had set his teeth as if he were then and there about to wrestle with himself as Jacob wrestled with the angel. The only way to begin to free himself from Rosamund was to banish her as far as possible from his mind. He resolved to do so.

But it was a dreary and disheartening task. He had been amazed to discover how every movement and every word recalled her and how his thoughts were always returning to her, however he might try to think of other things. She haunted him, body and soul : in those four months she had come to be the one all-absorbing fact of his life, and often he had to give up the struggle and let his mind dwell on her for a little, for fear life should become too bleak and arid.

In two days' time another letter came from her, gay and affectionate, a letter which, from anyone but Rosamund, would have been a love-letter. Strange, unaccountable creature ! He hoped miserably that she would cease writing and give him a little rest, but every two days a new one came, and he answered them, trying in his answers to assume the affectionate gaiety of hers. But it had been difficult to pretend feelings which were not his,

and often he had sat with the pen in his hand, staring in front of him, unable to write a single word.

Rosamund must have noticed a change in his letters, for in one of hers, after Christmas, she had enquired rather pointedly after his "complaint." "The 'complaint,' you will be glad to hear," Christopher had written in reply, "is better. I am taking a cure from which the faculty confidently predict the best results"; and then, for fear his facetiousness might mislead her, he had added in a postscript: "Seriously, the complaint is much better. I am really trying, as I promised you, to cure myself." The result of his confession had been surprising.

> "DEAR CHRISTOPHER," Rosamund had replied on New Year's Eve, "You are rather a turncoat, aren't you? Just when your *unshakable* persistence was beginning to stir all sorts of wonderful new feelings in me, feelings which I had thought I should never know again, you turn round and tell me you no longer love me. Isn't that rather unfair? However, perhaps, after all, it's just as well."

That letter of hers had come to him as a reprieve to a condemned man. Life had suddenly brimmed up with joy and colour. The thought that those new feelings which were stirring in her were feelings for him had moved him so profoundly that the tears had started to his eyes and he had wept from sheer happiness. Lovely, lovely Rosamund! To think that all he had so desperately hoped for had suddenly

come true, that just when he had come to believe that he had lost her, he was within a hair's breadth of winning her !

He had crept away to his bedroom, locked the door, and flung himself on his bed in an ecstasy of happiness. Two days later he was on his way back to London.

CHAPTER XVIII

Rosamund glanced at the clock. It was a quarter-part six. Christopher always got back from the office between five and six, but it was generally nearer five than six. She told herself now that the chances were against his returning. In an hour and three-quarters the guests would be arriving, and she felt that she would hardly be able to bear the ordeal of the party. She was tired and out of temper : however would she be able to chatter and do the honours and carry off without some fatal slip all the little lies and subterfuges which the circumstances would demand ? Why had she not wired to put them off ? She would have been free now to have a light supper and go to bed. If Christopher had had the smallest trace of feeling he would not have chosen to-day of all days. And to keep her on the rack like this, hoping and fearing all afternoon, was a refinement of cruelty. She imagined him trying to devise an extra twist to the torture to which he was submitting her. Had he laughed to himself, she wondered with a sudden thrill of anger, when he had hit on that ingenious idea ?

All at once she realised that Christopher would never have expected her to ring him up again at the office and so he would not have anticipated that she would discover that he was not returning to the

office after lunch. For the moment her resentment against him was baffled. He had not, then, after all, deliberately invented this extra twist to her anxieties. With pursed lips she sat staring grimly at this new aspect of his behaviour. What must he have supposed would happen ?

And then she saw. His intention had been even more diabolical than what had actually occurred ; for it had been, obviously, that she should expect him all this time and discover only at the last minute that he was not coming. At the very last minute she would have been faced by these worries and perplexities which had been tormenting her all afternoon, and in the middle of her agitation at the discovery she would have been faced too by the arrival of the guests. He had wanted to make a fool of her, to humiliate her in front of all these strangers.

Strangers ! Yes, she felt now, as she looked forward timidly to their imminent arrival, that they were all six of them almost strangers to her. If they had been friends it would not have mattered : she would have told them that Christopher had had to go away and that everything was in a muddle, and they would have helped her out. Yes, it was his revenge on her for refusing to invite those people he had wanted, and it was a mean, underhand revenge. That was a thing she had not expected of Christopher. She had always believed that, with all his faults, he was straight.

For a moment her mind paused in its mad inventions, and with extraordinary vividness she saw his face as she had often seen it in those days when they used to dine together in Soho. His eyes, when

he was trying to persuade her, had shone with a clear directness which had seemed not only to lay open to her every corner of his mind, but also to pierce to the depths of hers. It was as if their blue had caught fire. Often she had had to turn away her eyes from that gaze of his, feeling herself thrilled and disturbed by it. She had seen that look in his eyes on that evening seven years ago when they had met for dinner on his return from his Christmas visit to his mother. It had been delightful to see him again. She always forgot, when he was away, that vivid quality in him which had made him seem, even when he was silent or depressed, so intensely alive.

But she had also been alarmed that evening to discover how seriously he had taken her letter rebuking him for his sudden recovery. It had perhaps been rather an unwise letter, she thought now. She had written it in a moment of pique. His letter had seemed to her rather an inadequate reply to the cheerful, affectionate one she had written to him : it had come, in fact, as a snub, and, as he knew well enough, it always made her angry to be snubbed. She had never meant him to take it as a recantation of her first letter.

But that, obviously, was how he had taken it, and he had come back to her glowing with rapture. She had tried to explain to him that he had misunderstood her, but he had gleefully overridden all her expostulations, and she had been unavoidably carried away by his exuberance and fascinated by the spectacle of his passion for her.

And she had begun too, fool that she was, to be intoxicated by his intoxication. Life had begun to

whirl into a delicious dance about her, inviting her to abandon her absurd resistance and let herself go. Was she sincere, she had asked herself, in her stubborn clinging to Norman? She had reminded herself a hundred times that she hated him. Why then, did she allow him to have such a hold over her still and to poison her life as he did? What was she hoping for from him? Not, certainly, that he would take her back: nothing in the world would induce her to go back to him. And yet, if he were to come to her and implore her to return, telling her that he could not live without her, would she be able to resist him—the brown eyes, the brown hair, the deep male voice, the touch of his hands which she would never forget as long as she lived? But she was imagining impossibilities. How Norman himself would have laughed if he could have known that she had pictured him in such a rôle.

No, Norman had finished with her: there was no good trying to blind herself to that. And hadn't she finished with him? Yes, she would prove both to herself and to him that she had, by abandoning her resistance to Christopher's importunity. After all, Christopher was worth ten of Norman and he loved her madly. It would be a relief to emerge from these arid ruins among which she had so pertinaciously confined herself ever since she had quarrelled with Norman, and to allow Christopher to lead her out into this springtime of happiness which he promised her so confidently. She had grown very tired of resistance, and what, after all, was she gaining by it? Besides, in the end Christopher had swept her off her feet. She could not have resisted him even if she had

wished to. Before, he had seemed gentle, sometimes too gentle ; but now he had suddenly become as high-handed and masterful as Norman himself. It had astonished her and it had thrilled her.

Two days after his return to London she had given in, fool that she was. And yet, how delightful it had been to yield ; to give up all resistance and to be reckless and light-hearted and adventurous once again. She had written to Norman telling him of her engagement, a light-hearted note with a little sting of sarcasm in it, and had felt keenly resentful of the serious and friendly congratulations in his reply. Early in April she and Christopher had been married and had gone off to the south of France for their honeymoon. She had never been abroad before, and the channel-crossing, the night in Paris, the long journey south next day, the luxuriance and brilliance of the southern spring had entranced her.

And Christopher had entranced her too. She had felt that a marvellous new life was beginning for her. It had seemed as if they could never have enough of one another.

Rosamund stirred in her chair and shivered. The clock on the mantelpiece had shot a single bright bullet across her dream and the dream was shattered. It was half-past six and Christopher had not returned.

CHAPTER XIX

At the moment when the chime of the clock roused Rosamund from her dreaming, Christopher, in the reading-room of his club, rose to his feet and threw the *London Mercury* back on the magazine table. He too had been dreaming of the blissful weeks which had followed his return to London in the New Year of 1921, dreaming of them with such intensity and absorption that his body, lying motionless in the deep chair under the dim, coffered ceiling of the reading-room, was little more than an empty case ; for all the emotional part of him had dropped back seven years and was thrilling again with the raptures of those unforgettable days. Perhaps it had been the concentration of his thoughts upon her which had projected that sudden clear vision of his face into Rosamund's thoughts as she sat mentally raging at him, and had turned her mind from its mad recriminations to a memory of the brief days of their happiness.

That sudden happiness had brought with it, for Christopher, a sense of unlimited vitality. He had decided immediately that he must make more money. It was not fair to ask Rosamund to marry him if he could not offer her a better and securer income than that which he had made out of journalism, and he had called on old Mr. Templescombe

and asked him if his offer to take him into his office was still open. All the old reasons against accepting that offer, which had appeared to him so vital before, had vanished like mist in the light of his new prospects. The daily six hours of drudgery, from which he had shrunk with loathing before, would be easily endurable if he had Rosamund to live with and to work for. Mr. Templescombe had welcomed his change of mind, and Christopher had signed away his freedom without the smallest misgiving. Two days later he had entered the office.

The work, as it turned out, was very far from being drudgery. He recalled with a bitter smile the zest with which he had thrown himself into it, and he remembered, too, how it had amused him to order the black coat and waistcoat and the grey trousers and bowler hat and turn himself into the complete business-man for Rosamund's sake, and how, the first time he had put them on and shown himself to her, she had shouted in surprise : " But Christopher, they suit you marvellously. I never realised I was going to marry such a terribly handsome man."

If only he could recover that energy and zest for work. Now, at the bare thought of the office, his heart sank, and the shape and colour of the entrance-hall and the stairs and the office itself, the sound of the stairs under his feet, the slow wheeze of the swing-door with MESSRS. TEMPLESCOMBE & BRADE painted on it, the stale, particular smell of damp stone and slowly decaying wood, all those joyless details which had bitten into his mind as a sand-blast bites into glass, roused in him an almost physical nausea.

Good God ! To think that to-morrow he would be plodding up those stairs again, that he would pause once again on the landing with that sickening feeling that his strength was ebbing away through the soles of his feet, that the door would greet him for the two thousandth time with the same slow, consumptive wheeze, and that he would sit once again alone in his office chair, the bound and helpless victim of the scorn of every heart-rendingly familiar object that the room contained—of the great oak cabinet, the fire-irons, the Turkey carpet, the antique weighing-machine on the mantelpiece, the clock with the engraved steel face, and, most heart-rending of all, the black marble frog which Rosamund, in her exquisite beauty of those far-off happy days, had pressed against her face.

Her face ! That passing reference was enough to send his thoughts rushing back to her, for his intent dreaming of old days had, in some ghostly sense, restored her to him as she had then been. All resentment against her was gone now ; for that flood of old memories had roused a hundred old tendernesses. Countless small hidden emotions which had not been stirred for years awoke and pulsed with a sense so keen that it was almost pain. He could no longer realise that, once having been what they had been to each other, they were now so no more. For all his life, as he had reviewed it gradually and brokenly to-day, had surely been the prelude to that supreme happiness which, for a short time, he had found with her. What had followed had been an incident only ; it was impossible to believe that such a hideous distortion of their previous life together could be the

result of all the good that had gone before it. Such a thing was against his whole conception of life. He could have accepted death, even the death of Rosamund, for, though her death would have cut short his life as surely as it cut short hers, though it would have robbed him of all share in the future, it would yet have left him her love and that past in which he had lived with her. But this disaster which had come upon them was a denial of love : it was a sinister and poisonous thing, a thing much more cruel than death.

Christopher came to himself to find that he was walking up St. James's Street. He was dazed and bewildered. Without realising what he was doing, he had left the reading-room, gone downstairs, got his stick and hat from the cloak-room, and left the club. Apparently he had even washed his hands, for they felt as if they had been recently washed, and, holding the palm of his left hand to his face, he recognised the familiar scent of the club soap. He wondered if in his profound abstraction he had done anything noticeably absurd. Probably not, he thought, for the body can generally be trusted to go soberly about its business when the mind is absent.

He decided to walk home. He wanted still to linger for a while, undistracted by the present, with the beloved Rosamund who had come back to him so vividly as he had sat dreaming in his club. How wonderful it had been, after their marriage, to return home from the office, open the door of their little house, and hear her call from upstairs or from the morning-room : " Is that you, Chris ? " Or to go out to dinner with her, or to a concert or a play, and,

when it was over, realise with a thrill that she was not going to jump on to a bus and leave him, but that they were going home together. Life for him then had reached the summit of happiness. It had taken on a supreme meaning and reason which it had never had for him before, except during the war. But this new life with Rosamund was as far above his war-time life as that had been above the lonely aimless life of his previous years in London.

And Rosamund had been just as happy as he was. She had spoken to him again and again of her happiness. " Darling Christopher," she had said in one of her impulsive outbursts, " how marvellous it is to know that everything has gone right after all." " Six months to-day since I escaped," she had said when they had celebrated the first half-year of their married life by an afternoon at Hampton Court.

And yet, even then she would never admit that she loved him, and once, some months after their marriage, when he had questioned her, she had replied : " What does it matter, Chris ? Why should we bother ourselves about a word when everything is so delightful ? "

Why, indeed ? He had not bothered about it : he had bothered about nothing in those blissful months, seeing her so radiantly happy and feeling as happy himself. But why, he asked himself now, had she even then maintained that small reservation, even though it was no more than a word ? Was it the voice of the unhappy part of her, asserting its claim to be heard among those wonderfully changed circumstances which had so nearly reduced it to silence ? Was it the symbol of her one last shred of

independence which she unconsciously held in reserve as her justification in some possible emergency—in the disastrous emergency which, perhaps, her uncannily perverse mind dimly even then foresaw, was even then blindly preparing ?

His weary brain revolted against that tangled problem. He would never know the truth, for no one but God can explore the dark recesses of another's mind.

It was barely a year after their marriage that the blow had fallen. Barely a year of happiness, and then that happiness had been suddenly and completely annihilated. How well he remembered that terrible evening : he would remember it in all its details until the hour of his death.

He had returned from the office as usual and had let himself into their home with his latchkey ; and he had been a little surprised, after he had shut the front door and put away his hat and umbrella, not to hear a door open and her voice call him as usual. He had looked into the dining-room and the morning-room, and, not finding her there, he had gone upstairs. Perhaps there were callers in the drawing-room. He had opened the drawing-room door, half expecting to hear voices and the sound of teacups, but the room had been silent and empty.

But, though it was empty, he had had the impression that the room was expecting something, and next moment he had noticed that the silver kettle on the tea-table was boiling. A straight, softly hissing plume of vapour was streaming from the spout : the spirit-lamp under it was blazing as if the spirit had vaporised. He had gone to the table and with some

difficulty had succeeded in blowing the lamp out. The cups were still unused and the cakes and bread-and-butter untasted. What could have become of Rosamund ?

He had taken out his watch. It was a quarter-past five, half an hour after her usual tea-time. He had gone to the drawing-room door, which he had left open, and had stood outside, listening. The house was absolutely silent. From downstairs in the basement came the clash of an oven door, and then silence again, a rushing, tingling river of silence that filled the house.

Then he had turned to their bedroom door and knocked. There was no answer and not a sound from inside, and he had opened the door, gone in, and stood, with his hand still on the door-knob, surveying the room. At first he had thought that it was empty, like the rest ; but next moment his heart had leapt to his throat, for he had caught sight of a figure lying huddled on one of the beds. He shut the door quickly and rushed to the bed. " Rosamund dear," he had said, bending over her, " whatever is the matter ? "

She lay turned away with her face hidden, and at the sound of his voice she did not move, but her shoulders shook with inaudible sobs. He knelt down by the bed, and, putting his hand on her shoulder, gently tried to pull her round, but she shook off his hand and turned petulantly away.

" What is it, Rosie ? " he asked again. " Tell me what it is, dear." He had refrained from touching her again, and for a while they had both remained motionless, she huddled away from him and he kneeling beside her. Her sobs had almost died down ;

only occasionally her shoulders were shaken by a little, half-suppressed spasm.

At last she had turned, showing him a white, tear-stained face. " I've seen him, Christopher," she had said in a dry, feeble voice.

" Seen whom, dear ? "

" Norman. I—I saw him getting on to a bus near Hyde Park Corner."

" Well, and what happened ? " He talked to her soothingly, as if talking to a weeping child.

" Nothing," she said.

" Nothing happened ? He didn't speak to you ? "

" No, he didn't see me. But, you see, directly I saw him I knew—I knew it was all no use."

" No use ? What was no use, Rosie ? "

" Our being—being as we are, married. Directly I saw him, before even I knew it was him, my heart —my heart just—stood still."

Christopher, hearing her say that, had felt as if his heart too had stood still. It was as if all the warm humanity in him had suddenly touched ice and shrivelled. He did not speak. He knelt beside her feeling too tired and too sick to move.

" What a fool I was, what a fool I was to listen to you," she wailed, and the horrible cruelty of her words, her sudden complete disregard of him and of his feelings had cut him to the heart. What could he say ? What could he do ? He felt helpless and stultified in the presence of her despair, from which her self-reproaches had so ruthlessly shut him out. In the silence her sobs began again, a regular rhythm of little dry gasps which soon, for his exhausted sense, lost all human quality and became an exasperating

sequence of mechanical noises. Christopher found himself counting them . . . twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two . . . twenty-three, twenty-four, twenty-five. And then, again returning to the agonising actuality, he realised that it was Rosamund, Rosamund sobbing as if her heart would break. He was suddenly overwhelmed with pity for her. " Rosie dear ! " he said, and laid his hand again on her shoulder.

She shook herself like an angry child. " Don't ! " she gasped between her sobs. " Don't touch me."

Sunk in misery as he was, that physical rejection of him was more than he could bear. He had withdrawn his hand as if it had been stung, and, rising heavily from his knees, he went over to her dressing-table and sat down on the chair that stood before it, his hands clasped along the back of it and his head laid on his arms.

So he had sat, while time flowed over him with long, slow pulsations. On, on, on ; immense lengths of time flowed over him and he neither moved nor thought. His mind was a huge, aching cavern, empty of everything but pain. Once he had raised his face and looked towards her bed. She had not moved. How terrible to know that she lay there in misery and he could not go and take her in his arms and comfort her, to know that something cold and sinister had come between them, dividing them more effectually than a whole earthly continent. He lowered his face again. There was nothing to do but to endure in patience. Perhaps in a day or two things would be better.

Again it had seemed that a great length of time

flowed over him, and then he had heard Rosamund stir. He raised his head. She was sitting up, staring blindly in front of her. She looked as if she was surprised to find herself there. Seeing that he was looking at her, she got down from the bed and tottered towards the door. "I'd better go and bathe my eyes," she said, and there had been something unbearably pathetic for Christopher in that commonplace little phrase. He had not moved from the chair on which he was sitting. The fact that she had spoken to him had comforted him, and it had comforted him too to be sitting in her chair in front of her dressing-table.

In a few minutes she had returned, and, finding him still sitting there, she had paused by the chair and stood looking down at him. He raised his face, and as his eyes met hers he felt them suddenly fill with tears. Then she had flung her arm round his shoulders. "Chris dear," she had said, her voice full of remorse, "I don't *want* to make you miserable."

Her sudden change from hostility to tenderness had been more than he could bear, and he had broken down and wept in her arms.

They had spent a strange, silent evening together. At dinner she had hardly spoken, but her silence had seemed to him to be due to exhaustion rather than to any feeling of hostility towards him, for when she did speak there was no unfriendliness in her voice. It had been the same when they went to bed. When she spoke, it was as if her mind were absorbed in other thoughts : only when she wished him good night he had noticed a return of sympathy in her voice, as if

she had again remembered that he too must be suffering severely.

For hours he had lain awake. Sometimes his mind stood still, staring stupidly and uncomprehendingly at this strange disaster which had overtaken them ; sometimes the horror of realisation rose like a great black wave and swallowed him and he sank through dark fathoms of pain, feeling that he would never again see the light.

How well he remembered his waking next morning ; the confused sense that something terrible had happened, and then, as he realised what it was, the longing to escape from the intolerable fact and to take refuge again in the insensibility of sleep.

How horrible such suffering was, he reflected, as he turned into the Green Park through the gate near the Ritz, so as to avoid the noisy traffic and the interminable iron railings of Piccadilly and walk instead among the young green of trees and grass along the edge of the park. Thank God, he was free from that suffering now. Anything better than that ! Compared with it, this grey apathy in which he had lived for so long was almost happiness.

But what had it been, he asked himself blindly, as he had asked himself a hundred times before during the last six years, that had so suddenly and completely destroyed their happiness ? Had it really been something beyond her control ? Had something been snapped in her mind at the sight of that other man whom she had loved ? Had it been an accident as unpreventable as the bursting of a blood-vessel ? If that were so, he was a monster of inhumanity to feel for her anything but tenderness and pity. But he had

never been able to believe it. That Rosamund, who in other matters had always shown such perfect self-possession, who had sometimes even shown too much rather than too little sanity, should be suddenly swept off her feet by an emotional crisis, was a thing beyond belief; and it was because he could not believe it that he felt so bitterly resentful towards her. For the only other explanation was that she had callously betrayed him, that at the first trial of faith she had abandoned him without a thought, that his life and happiness, which he had given into her keeping and she had accepted so gladly, had counted for nothing with her.

Was it mere selfishness in him to be so pained by her lack of thought for him? Surely not. Surely, when two people married, they undertook to be loyal to one another. That was not, at its best, a moral duty: it was an impulse of the heart which was obeyed spontaneously and with no sense of obligation. But even if it did not exist as an impulse from within, honour and decency and humanity demanded that it should be obeyed as an obligation. What had hurt him so unbearably was the feeling that Rosamund had without a moment's hesitation betrayed him. If only she had made the smallest attempt to spare him, if only she had shown the smallest trace of anxiety to safeguard their relationship as a thing valuable to her, it would have been enough; yes, even if she had failed in the attempt.

But what was the use of going over it all now? If he had failed, after all the long torment of thought during the last six years, to understand what had happened, it was not likely that he would succeed

now. And yet it was difficult to give up the attempt, for he felt that, if once he could completely grasp what had happened to her at that moment when she had seen Norman getting on to the bus, he would be able to forgive her, and so escape from the dark influence of their disaster which had dogged them for six years. He was not so foolish as to hope that they could recover their lost happiness. That would be impossible : for they were no longer the same people they had been six years ago. They had changed, and diverged as they had changed, until they had become almost strangers to one another. But he felt still, in spite of the lamentable failure of his attempt at breakfast this morning, that, if only he could persuade her to open her heart to him, they might make a new happiness, even though a more sober and less ecstatic one, out of the ruins of the old. It would be almost as if two lonely people were to come together and do their best to build up together a happiness which neither had been able to achieve alone.

He began to wonder what the real Rosamund was like nowadays, the Rosamund that must exist under the sometimes indifferent, sometimes exasperated exterior which was all that he had known for so long. She must be a very different creature from the Rosamund from whom he had been so suddenly torn on that evening six years ago. If the crisis had spent itself quickly and they had resumed their relation, somewhat damaged, but still a living fragment of the old relation, within a short time, the rebuilding of their life together would have been a simpler matter ; but, for reasons which he had never understood, the effects of the crisis had persisted

and slowly, through the years that followed, poisoned their lives.

He remembered the terrible days that had followed that first tragic evening, days in which he had been swung between hope and despair, until he had come to feel that his endurance would snap like an over-strained cord and he would go mad.

For Rosamund had changed, sometimes two or three times in a single day, from sympathy to fierce hatred. He would leave her in the morning almost believing that all was going to be right, and that, if he was patient and forbearing, they would come together again ; and he would go about his office-work with that feeling of marvellous relief which the invalid feels in the unlooked-for cessation of pain. But when he returned home in the evening, he would find her unaccountably turned against him, and he would be plunged back suddenly into the agony of despair. He had supposed during those terrible days that she was struggling between Norman and him, and when, after some weeks her state had grown no calmer and her sympathy for him seemed to be dying out, he had resolved, after long and agonised reflection, that he must set her free.

He had found her, on his return home that evening, sitting in the morning-room with a closed book on her knee, staring in front of her with a white, tearless face. She had not spoken nor turned her head when he entered the room, and when he sat down on the sofa beside her she had shown no other awareness of his presence than a faint impulsive movement away from him.

" Listen, Rosamund," he had said, " I want you

to know, dear, that you must consider yourself quite free to do as you wish."

At that she had turned her head sharply and looked at him. " Free ? " she had said.

" Yes, free to go to Norman if you feel you must. I won't put any obstacle in your way."

She had kept her eyes fixed on his face. For a moment her expression had softened and a beautiful sympathy had welled up in her eyes. But only for a moment. Before she could reply her face grew hard again and she turned away. " It's a little late to begin talking of obstacles now, isn't it ? " she said in a cold, judicial voice.

Her reply chilled him. " As you like," he answered, with a weary sigh. " I only thought it might help you to know that I am ready to do anything that is best for you. I would let you go if you wanted to go."

" Go ? And where can I go ? " she said.

" If you want to go to Norman, I shall not stop you."

That, to his astonishment, had exasperated her, and she had turned upon him with a kind of infuriated facetiousness which, to this day, remained in his mind as a thing horrible in itself and insufferably wounding. " To Norman ? " she had said. " I am not aware that I asked to be allowed to go to Norman."

He had not realised then, as he had learnt later, that Rosamund knew that Norman would not take her back, and so he had been not only mortified, but also utterly bewildered by the ferocity of her reply.

As the months went by, it had seemed that her

resentment against him grew—a fierce, meaningless resentment which seemed to have no other aim than to wound him. The whole disaster, indeed, had seemed to him meaningless and aimless. It seemed that at the sight of Norman her heart had been changed suddenly, as if by a kind of diabolical conversion ; and yet nothing, it seemed, was to come of it. She did not wish to go to Norman : she would stay at home with her husband, poisoning their lives by the fierce resentment which she cherished against him. He could not understand why, if she was resolved to stay with him, she was also resolved to make their life together one long misery.

Her unexpected refusal to go to Norman had come as an immense relief to him, for it had seemed to show that, in spite of her words and behaviour to him, there remained in the bottom of her heart some regard for him. That had been the one thing that had made life endurable to him : whatever he might suffer, hope still remained. But that hope, he had at last discovered, was an illusion, and when, in the end, it had died, it had left him reduced to a state of apathy in which he was willing to live on, dully and uncomplainingly, on the one condition that he was spared any further suffering.

In that condition he had continued down to this very morning, the morning of his birthday, on which, for some reason unknown to him, something had stirred in him, some last cry, perhaps, of his departed youth, and had set him pondering upon his past life and the state to which he had now declined.

The effect of his pondering was that, almost without his being aware of it, there had grown up

in him a resolve to recapture, before it was too late, the manhood which he had all this while been allowing gradually to slip away from him. The memories of his childhood had aroused in him a longing for all sorts of vital things which for years had ceased to exist for him. And most moving of all had been those memories of Rosamund as she had once been—lovely, desirable, full of the lively zest of life. He longed passionately to call back to life that dead Rosamund, and it seemed to him now—as he recalled again what she had been and felt his dissolving apathy tremble and thrill with the old passion for her, which nothing but death could utterly destroy—that if only he could call loudly enough, if only he could reach to that deeply buried Rosamund who had once loved him—loved him even though she had never brought herself to confess it—that she would hear him and in some miraculous way return to him.

Why should the miracle not happen? A miracle had happened once before, a diabolical miracle which had changed her in a flash from a happy, loving woman to a cruel, insane creature whose one aim seemed to be to destroy all hope of happiness for both of them. Poor Rosamund! He recalled once again her heart-rending exclamation when, in an agony of remorse, she had flung her arm about his shoulders on that evening of their tragedy, "Chris, dear, I don't *want* to make you miserable."

That was the cry of the Rosamund he had loved, protesting despairingly against the distortion of her true nature by the cruel, incomprehensible fatality which had just befallen them. Could it be that, when

she rang him up at the office to-day, she was once more, after a silence of years, timidly appealing to him and trying in her dumb way to revoke her rejection of his appeal to her at breakfast this morning ?

More and more he felt that something was going to happen, that both he and Rosamund were moving towards a vital moment. It was not merely a superstitious fancy born of his longing that something would happen : it was that he perceived a gathering and stirring of things in his mind, things acutely felt, but not wholly understood, and that he was convinced that in Rosamund's mind, too, something was stirring. If what he imagined was true, and he felt assured that it was true, it lay with him to grasp the moment when it came and to rescue both of them once for all, from their long misery. If he was strong enough and persistent enough and patient enough, Rosamund would surely break through her stubborn antagonism and in the end reach out a hand to him.

Yes, he would go to her now ; he would pour out his heart to her ; he would not pause till he had broken this fiendish spell which had enslaved them for so long. All depended upon him : the happiness of them both was in his hands. If he failed now, it would be as if their disaster were to happen all over again ; the hidden Rosamund that he had loved would perish utterly and he himself would be plunged back into the grey, loveless hell of these last terrible years.

But he was not going to fail. He felt mysteriously assured of success. This sinister interlude in their

lives was reaching its end : the vital moment was at hand.

He rose to his feet in the ardour of his assurance, and four sparrows which had been foraging in the grass about his chair sprang up with a sudden startled flutter of wings. He would take a taxi and hurry home to her at once. She would be at home : she would have finished tea and would be wondering, perhaps, why he was so late. His heart palpitated with excitement as he hurried along the gravel path towards a gate which led into Piccadilly. There he hailed a passing taxi. In less than ten minutes he would be at home, and then he and Rosamund would be reconciled and the misery of the last six years would be wiped out for ever.

CHAPTER XX

At seven o'clock Rosamund had gone up to dress. Her anxiety had tired her, and she yawned sleepily as she began to unfasten her dress. She felt cold too ; she shivered, wondering if she was beginning with a chill. If only she had wired to put off her guests. She would give anything to be able to go quietly to bed and switch out the lights. Christopher was not coming now ; there was no longer any doubt about that ; but still, in spite of all reason, she went on hoping and hoping. What a relief it would be to hear him open and shut the front door and to know that all this worry was lifted from her shoulders. She would hardly be able to prevent herself falling on his neck and bursting into tears of happiness.

But not if he had stayed out merely to punish her ! Her face hardened and she bit her lower lip. If that was why he was late she would not for the world show him that she minded. But how marvellous it would be if it was all explained away ; if it should prove that he had left the office on special business and had been detained by a meeting or some inescapable engagement till the last minute. As she sat at her dressing-table brushing her hair she began to imagine all sorts of explanations. But then, surely, he would have sent her a wire or rung her up. Her

heart sank. Yes, it was inconceivable that he should have failed to do that.

She opened a drawer in her dressing-table to look for some silk stockings, and recognised with a shrinking of the heart the small oblong parcel containing the enamelled cigarette-box which she had tried to give him for a birthday-present. If only he would return now and explain that his lateness was an accident, how gladly she would give it to him. Tears rose to her eyes, but she swallowed them down and went on with her dressing. The clock on her dressing-table said twenty minutes past seven. When she had washed, she put on her new lilac silk dress, and for a moment, catching sight of herself in the looking-glass, she felt deliciously soothed, for it certainly suited her admirably. The troubles and vexations of the day had, fortunately, not spoilt her looks ; rather the reverse, for paleness suited her, and her eyes, their pupils dilated by anxiety and nervousness, were extraordinarily lustrous. The fact of her beauty comforted and reassured her.

Could it be that something had happened to him, that he had been run over and taken to hospital ? She imagined the news arriving. The telephone-bell would ring and she would go to answer it. " Is that Mrs. Brade ? "

" Yes ? "

" This is the So-and-so hospital. I am sorry to tell you, Mrs. Brade, that your husband has met with an accident. The ambulance brought him here a few minutes ago. It will be as well for you to come at once."

" Is it very serious ? "

" I am afraid it is. But he is fully conscious and has been asking for you."

Her heart was wrung with remorse. " Oh, Christopher dear, I did want to be nice to you this morning. I tried to, really I did. But we're friends now, aren't we ? As soon as you're well, everything will be all right again, just as it used to be."

She was standing beside his bed in the hospital-ward and he was looking up at her, immovable except for his eyes. He tried to smile at her. She put her hands to her eyes to blot out the heart-rending spectacle of his smile, and then, taking her hands away, gazed round her bedroom so as to free herself from that dreadful fancy. Why did she imagine such horrible things ?

Or suppose he had . . . ? But he couldn't. He wasn't the kind to do a thing so desperate. And yet, it was often the quiet, sane people who did the maddest things. Then there would be an inquest. Would she have to be there ? Would she have to view the body and answer questions ?

" Was your married life a happy one, Mrs. Brade ? Can you think of any motive he might have had for taking his life ? When you last saw him, did he seem to you in good spirits ? There was no quarrel between you ? "

How would she be able to answer such questions ? Nobody would ever understand. . . . She would never be able to explain. . . . For even she herself did not really understand. If she could show them her heart and all the things that had happened to her, they would know that it was not her fault, that there was something that drove her. And yet, could

she never have resisted? Had she not sometimes found herself deliberately saying and doing things that she knew would wound him? Then her name and her photograph would appear in the papers. "Mrs. Brade, widow of the deceased, a strikingly beautiful woman, was dressed in deep mourning." Everyone would say that she had driven him to it, and she would have to go away and hide herself, live abroad, perhaps, surrounded by strangers, till everyone but herself had forgotten the tragedy. The notorious Mrs. Brade!

Oh, wearisome suspense. No wonder her mind invented these absurdities: she was distraught with worry. It would have been bad enough at any time, but, with the responsibility of this dinner-party added to it, it was almost more than she could bear. If he was really doing it on purpose, as a mean revenge after their quarrel this morning, then she, in turn, would take *her* revenge. She would show him that, though he had not made a fool of her and frightened her as he had hoped, though she had not put off the party, but had carried it through perfectly without him, she thought him, none the less, a brute and a cad. She would make him pay.

She turned to the looking-glass to give a last glance to her hair, and was shocked to see how anger and hatred had altered her face. It was terrifying. She was ugly, actually ugly at that moment; a hag. It was all his fault, his fault for torturing her till her face was haggard. The clock said half-past seven. She went to the door, opened it, and, remembering that she had no handkerchief, went back to the dressing-table.

At that moment she heard the front door shut. Was it possible that . . . ? Her heart leapt to her throat, and she ran from the room to the stairhead and peered over the banisters.

She was just in time to see Christopher turn from the coat-stand towards the dining-room door. What was he doing? Apparently he had gone into the dining-room. He was looking, no doubt, to see if she had postponed the dinner-party, counting to see if a place had been set for him or if she had given him up. He would see the bottles of wine which she had ordered from Harrod's : he was probably examining them now and smiling sarcastically at her attempts to choose the right thing. A sudden fury seized her, and she beat softly but tensely with one clenched fist on the hand-rail of the stairs. Still there ! What was he doing, damn him ? Inspecting ! Spying upon her ! In twenty-five minutes the guests would be arriving. How could she receive guests, feeling as she did ? She was trembling all over. There was a sharp footstep in the hall : he was coming towards the stairs. With a palpitating heart she turned from the banisters and ran tiptoe into her bedroom. He was hurrying upstairs now. She stood waiting for him by the dressing-table. Suddenly he appeared in the doorway. His eyes shone and his face was flushed : she thought for a moment that he was going to rush towards her, and recalled with a sudden surprising vividness how he had looked years ago, soon after their marriage, when he used to return from the office and find her waiting for him in the drawing-room. But something, it seemed, stopped him, and, as he stood there looking at her, she saw his face

change. It was as if he had been confronted by an overwhelming disillusionment. If she could have seen herself in the looking-glass she would have known the reason.

Christopher, standing there in the doorway, felt as if he had been struck by lightning. He felt himself sway, the room swam before his eyes, and he shot out a hand to the doorpost to steady himself. In a few seconds he had control of himself. The room was clear once more and he could stand without support; and as he stood there, among the wreckage of his absurd hopes, it seemed to him that he had passed through a brief fit of madness, that by these hours of morbid delving into the past he had for a moment overthrown his reason. He realised what a dangerous thing it is to brood too intensely on what is dead and gone and to leave out of account too completely the hard, inescapable actuality of the present.

For it seemed to him now that in Rosamund's face he had rediscovered the iron reality. Just before he had left home this morning he had looked into that face, which had told him more surely than words of the utter extinction of her love; and he had looked into it again now, at the moment of his return, and it had not altered. All that he had experienced between, the lifetime of raptures and despairs, joys and miseries, crowded into those few hours, was mere delusion. Even the ardent conviction of the last ten minutes, when he had left the Green Park and hurried home in the taxi, certain with what seemed an indestructible certainty that he would burst through the barrier which had divided them for so long, had been nothing but pure madness.

How clearly he realised it now. His impulse to take her by storm had withered already to nothing more than an impotent regret.

Rosamund's voice broke in upon these thoughts and feelings which had swept, vaguely mingled together, through his mind during the few seconds in which they had stood watching one another.

" Are you ill ? " she asked in a voice which seemed merely to be seeking information.

" No, it's all right," he answered, passing his hand across his eyes.

" How is it that you are so late ? " Rosamund's voice went on.

" Late ? Is it very late ? " He realised at last that he had forgotten all about the time. He had not looked at his watch since he had first reached his club. " You're changed already ? " he said stupidly.

" Of course I'm changed," said Rosamund irritably. " What do you expect ? They'll all be here in twenty minutes."

Christopher stared at her in bewilderment. He could not believe that it was so late. It seemed to him that he had left the club soon after tea. It appalled him to think that in twenty minutes he would be faced by the arrival of all those guests, unknown, or almost unknown, to him. The party was yet another of the inescapable realities, the sign and symbol of Rosamund's stubborn antagonism. How, in this state of abject despondency, would he be able to talk and laugh and play the host ? He felt a momentary impulse to turn round, go downstairs, and leave the house. But he could not leave Rosamund now. It would place her in an

impossible position with her guests. " I'd better get dressed," he said. " I'd no idea it was so late."

For a moment when, as he stood in the doorway, she had seen his face turn suddenly white, Rosamund had been alarmed. She had thought he was going to faint, and the imprisoned mother in her had leapt up and struggled to escape, to rush to him and take him in her arms like a child and soothe away the despair which she had seen close down upon his face like a grey cloud.

What was it that had happened to him, what torment of the soul had taken hold of him as he stood there looking at her ? If only she could have thrown off the constraint which during all these years had held her from him, and speak and behave as that hidden self in her prompted ; if only she could forget all her grudges, forgive him everything there was to forgive, and give herself to him, asking nothing in exchange ! His face, just now when she had thought that he was going to faint, had reminded her of the face she had pictured a quarter of an hour—half an hour—ago when she had imagined herself finding him, injured by a street accident, in hospital. She knew that it rested with her to cure him, that the life of both of them was in her hands to mend or to wreck.

She made an effort to raise her arms : it seemed to her that she was striving to open her jaws to speak. But her arms did not move and suddenly she clenched her teeth. " I can't ! I can't ! " she thought, and she felt that some smothered, inaudible thing in her was crying out. " I haven't the strength." And then the evil Rosamund leapt forward to justify her.

" No, the reason why you can't is that you have the strength not to. It would be contemptible weakness to abase yourself. He is the one who must submit : not you. It wasn't your fault. It has never been your fault. He treated you monstrously. He dragged you into this, and then turned round and cursed you for it. Think of all the things he said to you this morning."

The evil Rosamund had won. She told herself now that it was anger that transformed his face just now, his anger of this morning still unabated. And then his pretence that he had not known what time it was was an obvious lie. No one could help knowing what time it was in London. And this lie, she saw clearly now, revealed the fact that there was no serious reason for his lateness : it was due merely to carelessness and indifference. Yes, obviously he was pretending that he had forgotten about the party in order to snub her. After all the worry and anxiety she had been through, nothing short of the most serious reasons could justify his lateness. And now, when he repeated his absurd pretence that he did not know it was late, her restraint broke down. " Don't be so idiotic," she burst out, trembling with anger. " Of course you knew it was late. You were late simply to irritate me. Do you imagine I'm such a damned fool that I don't realise that ? Because you're stupid yourself you imagine everyone else is as stupid as you are."

Christopher did not reply. What was the use of replying ? Here, once again, was the familiar voice of reality : it was useless to struggle against it. " I'll be as quick as I can," he said, and went to his dressing-room.

What a farce to be rigging himself out in tails and a white waistcoat when he was on the brink of despair. There was something grimly fatuous in clothing an aching heart in a boiled shirt. How accidental and haphazard a thing life was. For it seemed to him, now that he had grown calmer and had had a few minutes to think, that, after all, his hope of a reconciliation with Rosamund had not been so very wild. Surely it was all a matter of luck. Her voice had sounded friendly when she had telephoned to him at the office. If he had not, by the irony of fate, forgotten the present in his preoccupation with those memories which had moved him so deeply, if he had returned home at his usual time and not kept her waiting, he would perhaps have found her still friendly, and then perhaps the miracle would have happened. It was all a toss-up.

And yet, was it really within the bounds of possibility that a man or woman could in a moment shake off a habit or feeling which had been slowly, during six years, rooting itself into the mind ? Such a thing could happen only if the impulse came from within. He could never have forced conversion upon Rosamund. Unless the moment had arrived for her too, as it had arrived for him, he could have done nothing ; and to expect that they, who had diverged for all these years, should both have reached that critical point simultaneously was to hope for a wildly improbable coincidence.

So his reason argued. And yet, not long ago, his heart had dictated otherwise with an authority and assurance which had seemed incontrovertible. Perhaps it was because he had for a moment yielded to

reason when, standing in her bedroom doorway, he had been confronted so unexpectedly by the hatred in her face, that he had failed. If he had had the courage of his heart's conviction would he not have swept aside her hatred and broken through to the real Rosamund who waited for him behind the barrier? It was this, surely, that her pride demanded: it would yield to nothing short of overwhelming defeat. If only he had not flinched at that fatally critical moment, he would have carried her by storm, and the true Rosamund, so long imprisoned behind those barriers of pride and selfishness set up by her thwarted longing to be loved, would at last have been set free. By his moment of cowardice he had failed both himself and her.

And yet, wasn't all this theorising absurd? Was it not simply an attempt to elevate a commonplace incompatibility between husband and wife into a romantic psychological drama? He was far too prone, he knew, to invent elaborate interpretations for trivial occurrences. No doubt it was his desire to bestow the dignity of complex tragedy on his dull and unimportant little miseries.

Standing before the looking-glass in his white shirt and black trousers, Christopher brushed his hair. He hated the face that looked back at him out of the glass. Like all the desolating objects in his office, the weighing-machine, the clock with the steel face, the black marble frog, it was too relentlessly familiar not to be hateful to him. It represented the misery and failure and monotony of six years. Yes, his miseries were dull and unimportant. That was the tragedy, that one should suffer so long and so profoundly over

what was only dull and unimportant. What was the use in thinking about it? Thought, at such times, unless it is practical thought which aims at and ends in definite action, is nothing more than a disease of the mind.

With a sigh, he took up the white starched collar which had been laid ready for him on the dressing-table. A disease of the mind! His mind was being slowly sapped by a hopeless despondency, his body by a sloth and torpor which were gradually destroying his manhood. He had failed, failed to achieve what he had confidently hoped and expected to achieve, and failed even to hold what he had once possessed.

He was trying to fasten his collar. The starched stud-hole was too narrow to slip over the stud, and he struggled with both hands at his throat till his fingers grew numb. A sudden despair came over him: he was sure he would never get the collar on. He felt that some malevolent power—fate, providence, the adverse spirit of the world—knowing him tired and unhappy, was taking the opportunity to torment him. He lowered his arms and stood rubbing his numbed fingers together. Then after a pause he began the struggle again. With a supreme effort he succeeded in getting the stud through the first stud-hole. Then began the struggle with the other half of the collar. It was worse than the first. The starched surface slipped about on the polished head of the stud as if there were no stud-hole in it at all. He seized a pair of scissors from the dressing-table and bored the stud-hole open. Even that made little difference. Though he could slip the stud-hole over a

part of the head, no amount of pressing and pushing with his numbed forefinger could force it on completely. He felt an impotent, despairing rage welling up darkly in his soul. His watch lay before him on the dressing-table. It was ten minutes to eight. In ten minutes they would be coming. He must hurry. How monstrous, how insufferable life was. He was overwhelmed by the utter weariness and futility of it : his throat contracted, and then, to his surprise, he gave a loud sob and tears rushed to his eyes. He was on the point of breaking down. A nervous breakdown over a collar-stud. That would have been too contemptible, even though the collar-stud at the moment stood for all the adverse powers of heaven and earth. He had always had a secret contempt for people who went in for nervous breakdowns. For the first time he realised what it was that happened to them.

But he was not going to allow it to happen to him, and he arrested himself on the brink, pulled himself together. Quite definitely, as if some physical process had taken place, calm and self-possession returned to him. No doubt, he thought, smiling grimly, some gland had functioned just in time. That was how the determinists would put it. But that was not how he would put it. Nothing would make him believe that he had not exerted his will, that in some way independent of physical and material influences, whether internal or external, he had taken charge of himself, laid hold on life.

As he went downstairs five minutes later, he remembered that he had not got out the wine. He looked into the drawing-room on his way down, to reassure Rosamund, and found her standing, cold and

pale, by the fire, with an elbow on the mantelpiece.

" I'm ready," he said. " I'm just going to get out the wine."

She turned to him a face like a mask of chalk. " You needn't trouble," she said. " I've made other arrangements about the wine. You don't imagine, do you, that when you let me down I allow everything to go to pieces ? "

" I imagine nothing, Rosamund," he said. " I've imagined a good many things in the course of the day, and now I've returned to plain fact."

She eyed him with cold contempt. " I suppose you know what you're talking about," she said, " but I'm sure I don't."

" I mean that I'm glad you've seen about the wine," he said.

For the first time in his life he felt completely detached from her, and, looking at her now, as she stood with one foot on the fender and face averted—slim, beautiful, and self-absorbed in her lilac silk—he knew that she would never be able to hurt him again.

CHAPTER XXI

A flutuating murmur of talk rose and fell in the dining-room. The window-curtains had not yet been drawn, but the candles on the table were lit, and the conflict between daylight and candlelight produced a light which belonged neither to the one nor the other—a soft, wizard light, a mingled sheen of gold and silver, which made everything within its influence appear blurred and unreal. Even the people that sat at the round dinner-table seemed to be not quite real. Sir Edward's circular red face, featureless but for the small watery eyes and the black smudge of moustache, wore a slightly fuddled expression, as if he were half aware that things were not as they usually are. Lady Brawnton, square, sedate, and grey, on Christopher's right, had lost something of her benign solidity. Mrs. Jefferson-Jebb, in scarlet with black eyebrows and narrow, scarlet mouth skilfully painted on a smooth, waxen mask, had become a calm and infinitely sinister witch ; and, on the other side of the table, the head of Jefferson-Jebb, whose noble jaw and nose and penetrating eyes failed surprisingly to disguise a weak character, appeared to be completely hollow, a lantern made of almost opaque parchment. Two other figures, one raising white arms and neck and a golden head out of a sheath of iris-blue, the other black and white and

sandy-headed, swayed hands and heads among the rest; and, through the yellow and green of the tulips and the luminous stems of the tall candles, Christopher could see Rosamund in her pale lilac silk slowly turn her head like some beautiful, sad visitor from a far-off fairyland. It was almost as if they had dropped back eight years and were seated again at the Milvaines' table, and he were watching her, calm and self-absorbed, raising her eyebrows a little superciliously at the young artist on her left.

But that memory produced no emotion in him now. He contemplated it as he might have contemplated a photograph which was no more to him than the record of a fact. Past and present seemed to him now to be equally real and unreal. But it was not only in relation to Rosamund that he was aware of this mixture of reality and unreality. It was in everything. Just as the light that hung about the dinner-table was a conflict between the reality of daylight and the unreality of candlelight, so reality and unreality seemed to alternate in his mind. At one moment the table, the yellow flowers and fruit, and the diners seemed to him so fantastically unreal that he would hardly have been surprised if they had thinned away into the air, leaving nothing but a sparkle of silvery golden mist. What was he doing among these ghosts? What was she doing, that woman opposite to him, so piercingly intimate and yet so utterly alien?

But in a moment the unreality had vanished and he was talking fluently and easily to old Lady Brawnton on his right. He was perfectly self-possessed, perfectly able to converse and act the host.

Everything had become hard, definite, and familiar : all the vagueness had dropped from his mind. His attempt to come to an understanding with Rosamund at breakfast, their subsequent quarrel, the long, unhappy morning at the office, his lunch in the wine-vault in Ludgate Circus, the bus-ride to London Bridge, the long, lazy afternoon in the reading-room at the club and his final rush home, were a clear, continuous history of events, shorn of almost all their emotional equivalent.

The only event which remained as if out of focus was that which had occurred as he stood in their bedroom doorway looking at Rosamund. Some immense change had happened to him then, something violent and cataclysmic, as if he had been knocked down in the street and had for a while lost his senses. He had been hastening towards something, some event which was to be the inevitable conclusion of all that had gone before ; and suddenly, at the very moment of fulfilment, he had been violently checked, hurled aside from his mark, and left lying by the roadside stunned and helpless. The crowning event had not occurred. That was why, under his calm self-possession, he was aware of a curious sense of emptiness and unfulfilment. It was as if he were living in a state of suspended animation which permitted him to eat, drink, talk, and behave as he was expected to behave, but which held all his emotions and all the spiritual side of his life in a state of motionless expectancy. Secretly and with no outward sign, he was waiting for the event which had been frustrated. What it was to be and how it was to happen he did not know, and he did not at

present seek to know. One half of him was occupied in his duties as host, the other half in an incredulous observation of the fantastic puppet-show of which he himself was a part.

From time to time Rosamund glanced at him. She saw him talking to Lady Brawnton, pressing Mrs. Jefferson-Jebb to have more champagne, or giving some direction over his shoulder to Alice the waiting-maid. He appeared to be extraordinarily self-possessed : he almost looked as if he were enjoying the party. She had been afraid that her angry outbursts might have put him out of temper and that, in resentment against her, he might have neglected the necessary effort to entertain her guests ; for, as she knew well enough, they were her guests rather than his. She had watched his face when he tasted the champagne she had ordered, half expecting to see him make a grimace. The evil Rosamund was waiting ready, at the first twitch of his lips, to flare up in secret fury against him. But he had given no sign that anything was wrong. Once she had caught him, during one of the brief intervals when he was speaking neither to Lady Brawnton nor to Mrs. Jefferson-Jebb, gazing before him with an expression so lonely, so absent, that it had sent a pang to her heart. Then it seemed that he recollected himself, his face changed, and she saw him turn with a smile to Lady Brawnton.

What, she wondered, was happening in his mind ? She could not guess, for what did she know of his mind ? Could he really have lost consciousness of the time this afternoon, and have returned home late purely by accident ? But what had he been doing

all that time? She knew at least, from what Pinson had said on the telephone, that he had decided before lunch not to return to the office in the afternoon. Surely, then, he must have had in mind some scheme against her. Or was she simply imagining things? She had so often imagined things about him which had turned out to have no basis whatever. That, though she did not understand why, was the way her mind worked when Christopher was concerned. She realised that Sir Edward was talking to her.

"You can't expect me, I say to my wife, to be a charitable institution with unlimited funds. As a public man, Mrs. Brade, I put aside every year a fixed amount for charity, and if another deserving case comes along—as it always does, mind you—when the amount is used up, well, you've just got to harden your heart and turn it down. The hospitals do it, you know, Mrs. Brade. Turn it down!" He made a gesture of dismissal with a large red hand.

"Clay's Fertiliser," Mrs. Jefferson-Jebb's voice was saying. "I always use a dessert-spoon. Just sprinkle a circle of it round the roots and then water it well in. Nothing like it for . . ."

A wave of voices obscured the rest. Other phrases emerged and were swamped. A deep, hesitant voice, Mr. Jefferson-Jebb's, was heard saying: "So I gave it up. A year, after all, is . . ."

"Not nearly so good as Yvette Guilbert," said a clear woman's voice; but a harsh baritone cut across it: "Twelve and a half per cent., and as safe as houses."

Christopher's voice was audible for a moment: "You must get my wife to lend it to you; I know she has a copy." How warm and honest it sounded among the rest, and how curiously it moved her to hear it by chance, like that, as if she were eavesdropping. She found herself trying to catch his eye, to win from him a friendly glance across the barrier of strange faces and voices. But his eyes never turned in her direction, and next moment she had caught Lady Brawnton's eye, and, as the port had already been round, she rose from the table and she and the three other women made their way towards the door.

The next twenty minutes, during which the men sat drawn together into one half of the round dinner-table and the port was circulated, was occupied by a monologue from Sir Edward on the subject of money and money-making. "You mustn't forget," he said, "that it takes money to make money. You can't breed horses unless you have a couple of horses to make a start with, and you can't breed money unless you've the money to make a start with, either. It doesn't matter if it's only a very little, but it's got to be something. After that you just keep turning it over. You turn it over and you get a little more, and then you turn that over and you get a little more still, and so on. The longer you do it, the easier it is. Of course you've got to take risks at first: but, after all, you know, you don't get anything in this life—anything, that is, that's worth having—unless you're prepared to take risks."

Occasionally one of the other men asked a question. Sir Edward was always ready to answer

questions. But Christopher sat silent. He was grateful to Sir Edward for doing the talking : it gave him an opportunity of sitting silent without appearing morose.

He sat absorbed in the contemplation of his present circumstances. It seemed to him that, though materially he had spent the day in a kind of restless torpor, he had passed in spirit through a series of extraordinary adventures. The past had boiled up into the present and the present had reared itself into a great wave, and it had seemed to him that his whole life was rushing forward towards a crisis. Then, just when the wave was about to burst and rush forward and devour the land, the tide had been arrested, the power had died out of it, and, as it seemed against the very laws of nature, it had hung suspended in a motionless stagnation. What was there to come now ? Nothing but a resumption of the routine of the last six years. When in an hour or so the guests had gone, he would find himself face to face with Rosamund once more, and to-morrow he would get up, bathe, shave, go down to breakfast with the old weight of depression at his heart, and perhaps he and Rosamund would quarrel as they had done this morning—a fierce outburst of life-embittering reproaches. Then he would start for the office, and once again, like a performing automaton, he would go through the invariable process among the invariable surroundings—the slow ascent of the stairs accompanied by the smell of wet stone and decaying woodwork, the pause on the landing with the familiar feeling that his strength was ebbing away through the soles of

his feet, the long, consumptive wheeze of the office-door grating unbearably on the open sore in his mind ; and then, when he had shut himself into his own room, the soul-destroying stare of all those stale intimate things that had stood about him for six years as the inexorable witnesses of his futility.

From time to time fragments of Sir Edward's monologue broke in upon his thoughts. Among sundry details about investments, a phrase, spoken for the second time, struck him sharply. It was as if Sir Edward had read his thoughts and offered it as special advice on his present case. " You won't get anything in this life—that is, anything worth having —unless you're prepared to take risks." That statement appealed to Christopher. It breathed the spirit which had of late years been so fatally lacking in his life, the spirit of adventure. Sir Edward had gone the right way about the pursuit of his desires. Money had seemed to him the thing worth having, and he had pursued it bravely.

What was it that he himself desired ? Love ? Life ? Wisdom ? Happiness ? None of those words wholly defined it : it was something which contained them all. He had pursued it in the old days in travel and books, thought and dreams : he had pursued it daringly when he had courted Rosamund, staking all his happiness in the pursuit, but, though he had won Rosamund, he had lost his stake in the end. Since then he had risked no more. He had played for safety, and his reward had been a safety so complete that it was hardly different from stagnation.

But to-day he had had a vision of something else ; it had seemed to him that new life was about to

break in upon him and Rosamund, marvellously transforming and refreshing the old stale existence. How, after the disappointment of that thrilling hope, could he bear to relapse into stagnation? It was impossible. He could not face it : he had had his fill. The men seated beside him in the candlelight stirred in their chairs. Sir Edward had, it seemed, come to the end of his monologue. Each in turn refused another glass of port, and Christopher rose and conducted them to the drawing-room.

CHAPTER XXII

In the drawing-room an hour, an interminable hour, crawled by. It seemed to Christopher that time had stood still. The blinds were drawn ; thin clouds of cigarette-smoke, drifting sluggishly, slowly changing shape and thinning away, hung between the ceiling and the heads of the eight people disposed about the room ; an endless babel of talk, now soft, now loud, now transpierced by a woman's laugh or a man's harsh cough, dulled the ear as the smoke blurred the eyes. To Christopher, sitting in the middle of it all, it seemed that they were waiting in a timeless limbo for something to happen ; and he knew that they waited in vain, that nothing would ever happen. They would sit there talking and talking, immovable and helpless, among the flowers and lights and cigarette-smoke, and gradually they would realise that all was vanity and utter hopelessness. A black depression closed slowly down upon him, a heart-sickness which grew slowly deadlier and deadlier, and all the while he heard himself talking, amiably, mechanically, as if some other personality had taken charge of his body, leaving his own to brood in silence.

After another age of waiting he felt his depression transform itself gradually into fear, a cold, deadly fear at the certainty that, despite all those inner

stirrings and awakenings and the warm hopes of the day, to-morrow—a to-morrow which was worse, much worse, because more stale and monotonous than a mere relapse into yesterday and the two thousand days before it—was waiting for him inexorably. When he awoke to-morrow morning the octopus of custom would be hanging over him, waiting to entangle him and Rosamund once more in its paralysing grip. At that moment he perceived his situation in its full horror. It was something worse, much worse, than death. He knew now, beyond any doubt, that he could not bear to awake to-morrow to the life of the last six years. If he were to do so he would either go out of his mind or, if he were still sane enough to do so, he would kill himself. He realised with a curious calmness that he had at last reached the limit of his endurance. He rose to his feet. He heard himself calmly and politely making an excuse about telephone-calls to Mrs. Jefferson-Jebb, beside whom he had been sitting, and next moment he was closing the drawing-room door behind him.

The waiting was over. He had stepped out of limbo, shut away the drone of its voices, and now he was hurrying upstairs to his dressing-room. He was not conscious of having come to a decision in the drawing-room and of acting now on that decision. It seemed to him that thought and action had been simultaneous. He was acting on no preconceived plan : a plan was evolving out of his actions. He locked himself into his dressing-room and began stripping off his clothes. Tail-coat and white waistcoat ; white tie and starched collar and shirt, and

then his black dress-trousers ; one by one he stripped them off and flung them over the back of a chair. Then, quickly and quietly opening drawers and cupboards, he sought out an old suit, another, five or six soft shirts, various underwear. He put on one of the soft shirts and the trousers of one of the suits, and then, half-dressed, he lifted out from behind the dressing-table a large suitcase and took down an old rucksack from the hook in one of the cupboards.

He began to pack, swaying hurriedly between open drawers and cupboards and the open suitcase on the floor. Socks ! He would need lots of socks. He threw eight pairs into the suitcase. And shoes, old shoes in which he could tramp for a whole day without discomfort. In the cupboard near the fireplace he came upon an old felt hat, and flung it in with the rest. The sound of someone shutting a door came from downstairs, and he stopped, breathless, to listen. No other noise followed it except the vague background of rumbling traffic in Brompton Road and Kensington Road, and he threw himself feverishly again into his preparations. He felt almost light-hearted now. How exciting it was. He had the same excited feeling as he had had when playing " hide-and-seek " thirty years ago. How was he going to get his luggage downstairs, and himself and his luggage out of the house unobserved ? God only knew ! What if, just as he was reaching the landing of the first floor, the drawing-room door were to open and the guests come out ? What a ridiculous position. Among the crowd in evening-dress he himself, in old clothes, a bag in one hand

and a rucksack on his shoulder, would have to begin inventing rapid and improbable explanations, as in a French farce.

But, after all, what did it matter if they did discover him ? It would make no difference. A moment of embarrassment, and then he would be gone, the front door shut, and the company left to muddle it out as well as they could. It would be humiliating for Rosamund, of course ; but he had given Rosamund more than her due of consideration during the last six years. He forced the suitcase shut, snapped the locks, and then began to stuff things into the rucksack. He seized a handful of money that lay on the dressing-table and crammed it into his trouser-pocket, and then, with a writhing of arms and abrupt movements of the head, he pulled on his waistcoat and jacket, and with the quick assurance of a conjurer bestowed handkerchief, pocket-case, fountain-pen, cigarette-case, matches, and a pen-knife in their accustomed pockets. He was ready.

He stood for a moment looking sharply round the room, then dived for a drawer, pulled out a cheque-book, and pushed it into his breast-pocket. Then he went to the door and carefully opened it.

There was no one on the stairs, and he went out and looked over the banisters. A board creaked under his foot. A muffled murmur of talk came from the drawing-room. Below, in the hall, everything was still. He tiptoed back, pushed the door wide open, and, going into the dressing-room, slung the rucksack on his shoulder, took up the suitcase, and went out.

Like a burglar, he slunk with quick, cautious movements down the stairs. Now he had reached the first-floor landing : he was outside the drawing-room door. The dull murmur of talk surged up into a momentary gust of gruff laughter. How incredible that he should be behaving in this extraordinary way during a dinner-party at his house. Just when he had turned the corner of the stairs between the first floor and the hall, he heard the sound of a footstep below. Alice the waiting-maid came out of the dining-room carrying a large tray. There was no time to retreat. He stopped, in full view of her, and stood, still as a ghost, the suitcase hanging from his arm and the rucksack on his shoulder. If Alice raised her eyes she could not help seeing him. What would she do ? Drop the tray and scream perhaps. But her eyes were occupied with her surroundings, for the tray was heavy and loaded with plates and glasses. In a moment she was gone, and in another moment Christopher was in the hall. He deposited his bags near the front door and tiptoed back to the coat-hooks near the morning-room door to get a hat and raincoat. He seized a soft hat and put it on his head, and then rummaged feverishly among the coats. What the devil had become of the Burberry ? A bell rang in the kitchen : would it be the front door or the drawing-room ? Just as he found the Burberry Alice came running up the stairs from the kitchen. The morning-room door beside him stood open. He darted in. Alice hurried past the doorway and ran upstairs. As soon as he heard her round the turn in the stairs Christopher tiptoed out into the hall. As he turned the latch of the front door he heard

voices on the landing above. He snatched up his two bags, swung them out on to the step, and softly closed the door behind him.

As he descended the steps and turned up the square, he saw that a large saloon car, the Brawntons' no doubt, was waiting outside the house.

CHAPTER XXIII

It was not until the guests began to go that Rosamund discovered that Christopher was not in the drawing-room. She had seen him leave the room some time ago, but had never doubted that he had returned long since. What on earth could he be doing all this time?

"You must say good night to your husband for us," said Lady Brawnton as she shook hands with her, and Rosamund felt a moment's humiliation, as if the phrase were intended as a reproach.

The other guests did not refer to Christopher when saying good night, and that also humiliated Rosamund, for she felt that they were tactfully overlooking a breach of etiquette.

But she did not, this time, blame Christopher, though it was he who had been the cause of it, for she had more than appeased the evil Rosamund by her attack on him when he had returned home this evening, and, later, when he was going to get out the wine. The excess of her anger had somehow recoiled upon herself: not only had the evil Rosamund been appeased, but the good Rosamund had been hurt by it. There was a dull ache in her heart: she kept involuntarily recalling the painful change in Christopher's face when he had stood looking at her in the doorway of their bedroom,

and also that other change—the lonely, absent expression which she had detected at dinner as he sat for a moment silently gazing before him ; and at each recollection she was aware of little sharp stabs of remorse, guilt, and fear. She heaved a sigh of relief as the front door closed on the last couple, for she was depressed and very tired. The worries and anxieties of the day and the stress and strain of her divided feelings had tired her out, and she longed for peace of mind and rest for her body. If only Christopher would speak kindly to her again as he had done at breakfast, her last shred of resistance would dissolve in tears. How marvellously restful it would be to give up the struggle and resign herself unconditionally to Christopher. It rested with him now : she was too tired and too bewildered to make the first effort.

She stood in the hall, for she had gone downstairs with the Jefferson-Jebbs, who had been the last to leave. Where could Christopher be ? Could he have gone to bed ? Hardly. He must be writing letters in the morning-room. The half-open door of the dining-room showed her that the room was in darkness : he could not be there. She turned to the morning-room. It too was open and there was darkness within. She entered and switched on the light. The room was empty ; his desk closed. A vague fear shot a cold smart across her breast. Was life, the enemy, preparing some new attack upon her ? The evil Rosamund, the wilful, self-indulgent, irresponsible child who had always refused to face the results of her actions began to whimper fretfully in its dark cavern. She was so tired that it was an

effort even to switch out the morning-room light and shut the door.

How weak her legs were as she slowly climbed the stairs. What was it that had egged her on, when after all her fears she had at last got him safely back this evening, to torment and exasperate him even then by her attacks? Why could she not have desisted at last, especially when that despairing look on his face had cast such doubts on her wild suspicions? She had hardly waited to hear his explanation. When he had said that he had not known what time it was, she had cut him short. He had been on the point of saying more : she was sure of it now. But at such times it was as if something swept her off her feet, robbing her of all self-control.

She opened their bedroom door, switched on the light, and glanced at his bed, knowing that it would be empty. If only she could have seen the mould of his body under the blankets and his close-cropped golden head on the pillow. But she had been certain beforehand that life would deny her that, and her foreboding had come true. The bed was empty.

There was only one other place now; his dressing-room. She went out on to the landing and began to climb the stairs to the upper floor. What would she discover when she reached the top? She could hardly lift one foot above another.

Suddenly her heart began to flutter violently. The dressing-room door was open and there was a light inside. He was there. Yet not a sound came from within. What was he doing? What would she find when she went into the room? While she was still on the threshold, before she could see more than

half of the room, she knew that no one was there. What, then, awaited her within ? For a moment she paused, not daring to enter. Her legs were failing under her : in another moment she would collapse on the ground. With one hand pressed against the wall, she tottered forward.

Thank God ; she had not found what, for one horrible moment, she had feared to find. She dropped into a chair and sat immovable with closed eyes, recovering her strength. She had no consciousness of the passage of time and she could not have said whether she had sat there for five minutes or half an hour.

When, feeling at last a little calmer, she opened her eyes, the room told her more convincingly than any words could have done that Christopher had left her. Cupboards and drawers, flung open and obtruding their vacuity into the room, the light left burning as if in the hurry of departure, and his dress-clothes, the empty case of him, flung carelessly over the chair, confronted her, silent and immovable, as if, a few minutes before, the room had been the scene of a violent struggle. It was not merely an empty room ; it was a room from which not only the familiar outward appearance, but the personality, the very heart, had been ruthlessly torn.

She rose white-faced from her chair and softly shut the door. Then quietly, with trembling hands, she closed drawers and cupboards, bringing order back into the room : then, leaving his discarded clothes where they lay on the chair, she switched out the light and left the room, shutting the door behind her. Half-way down the stairs she paused at

the landing window, which was open. A sweet, cool air blew in upon her. Behind her, vaguely threatening, crouched the empty house.

When she had shut herself into her bedroom she stood for a moment gazing forlornly at its vacancy. Then she sat down at her dressing-table and slowly took off her necklace, which had been a present from Christopher ; a bracelet, also a present from Christopher ; and all her rings but her wedding-ring. Listlessly she pulled open a drawer, and with a shock of sudden discovery her hand closed over a small oblong parcel. She took it out and slowly unwrapped it.

It was a pretty box, just the sort of box that Christopher would have liked. Suddenly the hand that held it dropped to the dressing-table, the box struck the table with a loud snap, and, burying her face in her folded arms, she broke into a long, convulsive sobbing. Outside, a clock was striking twelve, filling vast spaces of warm night air with its calm, measured tolling. The raucous blast of a taxi's horn broke feverishly and irritably across its serenity.

CHAPTER XXIV

Having shut the door of his house behind him, Christopher walked rapidly along the western side of Trevor Square, with his rucksack slung on his left shoulder and his suitcase hanging from his right arm. He had no particular plan in mind. He felt that he had shaken himself free of an immense load. It was as if by shutting the door of his home he had shut off from himself all the dull misery of the last six years. His body and mind tingled with a marvellous elation. It was sheer joy to be carrying that load of baggage and to feel that he was homeless and without a single tie. It was not until he had left the square and was half-way down Raphael Street that he asked himself where he was going.

The reply was vague. He was going away, far away to strange places and strange people, far from Trevor Square and Lincoln's Inn Fields and this squalid little Raphael Street which he knew too well. Now he was passing Middleton's Dining-Rooms. The familiar placards in the window showed wanly in the light of the street lamps. TO-DAY . . . TO-DAY . . . and scrawled under each heading in a writing now illegible the various dishes which had been obtainable to-day. What had he to do with to-day? To-day was dying : in an hour it would be dead. His concern was with to-morrow.

He was almost at the bottom of Raphael Street now. On his left, solid, rotund, and Georgian, loomed "The Pakenham." Seven years ago he had greeted "The Pakenham" for the first time when he and Rosamund had entered Raphael Street from the Knightsbridge end on their way to inspect the house in Trevor Square. They had stayed there together for seven years, and now he was coming back alone. A vital period of his life was ended. And yet seven years was a small matter for "The Pakenham." It had stood there, solid and rotund, for a century or more, while the generations came to its bar and chattered and argued and laughed and quarrelled over their drinks about trivial, ephemeral matters, and then, man by man, ceased to come and ceased to chatter. Christopher had always had an affection for "The Pakenham," though he had never been inside its doors, and now, to his surprise, he felt a stab at the heart as he passed it which he had not felt when he shut the door of his own house a minute or two ago.

But the pain was brief, for he had recollected next moment that he was free and all the world was before him. But where, for the moment, was he going? He had better take a taxi, but before he could do so he must have a destination. Was it from Charing Cross or Victoria that the Folkstone and Dover boat-trains started? He could not remember. Anyhow, he would stay the night at the Charing Cross Hotel. It would do as well as another. He hailed a taxi.

How marvellous, how incredible that he had broken free. Free from what? From Rosamund? No, it was not Rosamund that he was free from: he was

free from himself, his old self of the last six years, his self of yesterday and to-day. He leaned back against the cushions of the taxi with a happy sigh and began soberly to make plans. He would not be able to leave town before to-morrow afternoon, for there was much to be settled first—letters to be written, his bank to be visited and arrangements to be made about an account for Rosamund and money for himself while on his travels. He would have to buy himself a ticket too. A ticket to where? France? Spain? Greece? or Italy; should he go to Italy and revisit San Gimignano? What a wealth of new experience to choose from. And he must buy books, for he would need books for the journeys and for reading in the evenings perhaps—clean, acid books to brighten and sharpen his mind, unemotional books, for he would have no need at present of second-hand emotions; his own new-blossoming emotions would fill his life.

How enchanting it would be to rediscover his lost youth, to plunge with something of the old enthusiasm into books and music and art, to set out with the old sense of adventure to visit foreign lands. He was not deluding himself into the belief that he would find in these things all that he demanded of life; but he knew that with their help he would regain the old delight in the mere fact of living and reconquer his lost peace of mind, his lost self-reliance. For the rest he trusted to the future. How stimulating it was once again to have an unknown future before him. He glanced at the open window of the taxi: on each side of him London was streaming past him, streaming behind him; he was shaking London off as a butterfly

shakes off its chrysalis or a snake its old skin. To-day was his birthday in more senses than one, for he was on the threshold of a new life, he was being born again.

Now he had reached Piccadilly Circus, and the taxi turned south down the lower part of Regent Street. He was leaving all the old haunts behind him now, not only Trevor Square, but Lincoln's Inn Fields and the office which he would never enter again ; Bloomsbury, where he had spent the unhappy days of his early life in London ; Shaftesbury Avenue and its tributaries, where he had taken all those solitary meals, where he had picked up little Rose Deacon, and where, later, he and Rosamund had had so many rapturous lunches and dinners together in their own little Soho restaurant. And not only these, but all those other places—the Queen's Hall and the other concert-halls, the theatres, Hyde Park, the Green Park, Regent's Park, the western exit of Oxford Circus, where he had so often seen her off into her bus—all soaked in the bitter-sweet memories of Rosamund as she had once been to him.

Now the taxi had reached Waterloo Place and turned left. Trafalgar Square, hard and black and gleaming as if fountains, balustrades, pavements, steps, the great black lions, and Nelson's Column had been cut out of a block of ice. Ahead stood St. Martin's in the Fields, an exquisite model of a church built of children's black and white bricks. Now the taxi was passing its southern wall, and next moment it curved to the right, cut across the Strand, and swung into the station-yard of Charing Cross.

How strange to be a visitor in this familiar

London, to enter an hotel and book a room. A lift shot him upwards and landed him on the third floor. The porter who carried his bags led him to his appointed room, unlocked the door, switched on the light, deposited his bags, and left him alone.

Christopher faced the starkly unfamiliar room with a sense of keen elation ; he felt himself proof against its dismal inhospitality. He turned to his baggage and opened the rucksack. It contained all he needed for the night : there was no need to open the suitcase. He would not open the suitcase until he arrived . . . where ? In what remote town or village would its contents see the light two or three days hence ? He would begin by walking. For days, perhaps for weeks, he would walk on and on, through strange villages, across mountains, through forests—wonderful, long walks which would wake his limbs and muscles to their old vigour, rouse in him hearty appetites for rough country food, and bring that delicious tiredness and the sound, dreamless sleep at the end of the day.

And other days he would spend idling in the cafés and inns of old towns, or on mountain-sides in the sun, or lying in the shade by lakes and streams. So the old zest of life would return, the old gaiety, the old peace of mind, the old arrogant health of body. And after that, what ?

He did not know ; he did not try to imagine. His concern was not with the future, but with the present. He envisaged the future with trust. To learn to live worthily in the present is the only way, Christopher believed, by which a man can fit himself to enjoy to the full the happiness or rise superior to

the suffering which the future may have in store for him. So a man shapes his own future.

He sat down and took off his shoes. Then slowly and contentedly he began to undress, taking off and laying by the clothes he had flung on so hurriedly an hour ago. In a few minutes he was ready for bed. He went to the window, drew back the curtains, pulled up the blind, and opened the window as wide as it would open. Then he switched out the light, and as he got into bed Big Ben began to strike midnight. One by one, with an infinite leisure, the brazen notes followed one another into the hollow of night, now loud, now soft, as the night breeze ebbed or flowed. Christopher stretched himself luxuriously in the cold sheets. His birthday was over. The first day of his new life had already begun.

Date Due

JUN 2 5 1996			
JUN 2 8 1996			

Armstrong, Martin
Donisthorpe